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District Selection and Assignment of Principals: A Texas Case Study

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District Selection and Assignment of Principals: A Texas Case Study

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Dedication

This dissertation embodies the culmination of a path that could not have been completed without the support and encouragement of many individuals. I dedicate this work to all who were there when I needed their source of strength.

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Abstract

District Selection and Assignment of Principals: A Texas Case Study

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The emphasis on student achievement results to measure school effectiveness has shed a spotlight on the role of the school principals and their impact on student learning. With the past three education reform efforts focusing on student assessment results as a method for school accountability, school district leaders must be strategic in selecting an effective principal who will lead their schools and increase student achievement rates. However, it is not clear how the principals are selected and placed on campuses in the district. Thus, this study focused on an analysis of the pertinent literature related to principal selection and placement to highlight what previous research suggests upon which to identify these practices and the implications for further inquiry. While some previous research has focused on the competencies and methods to screen principal candidates, it is not clear as to how a campus leader is selected. This qualitative study examined the selection methods a school district utilized to hire a campus principal for a low-performing school and the method a school district utilized when assigning a campus principal to a low-performing school. A single case study design was employed in this

study and included semi-structured interviews of two key district leaders from a large urban school distinct.

Findings from this study suggest the effective selection and assignment practices of principals resulted in rapid turnaround of schools needing improvement in levels of academic performance. The study found that the practices that led to those efforts were the district connectivity in the three areas of leadership alignment, campus fit and differentiated school support systems. Findings also indicate that the calibration of the district systems in the areas of leadership alignment, campus fit, and differentiated district support systems to align with a focus on student outcomes would set the stage for the strategic selection and assignment of principals to drive the turnaround work while increasing the district's bandwidth to support them once they are assigned.

Keywords: district selection, principal selection, district assignment practices

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter One: Introduction

In an era of accountability, school districts across our nation are part of the common practice of receiving federal and state school ratings based on the measurement of student achievement results from the state's assessment system. As part of the educational mandates, the school ratings are publicized to inform stakeholders of the quality of the schools. A study by Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, and Cohen (2007), states "With a national focus on raising achievement for all students, there has been a growing attention to the pivotal role of school leaders in improving the quality of education" (p. 1).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was enacted in 2001 and provided more funding flexibility to states alongside increased accountability for student results. The accountability section of the law included the requirement that, "States must develop and implement a single, statewide accountability system that will be effective in ensuring that all districts and schools make adequate yearly progress, and hold accountable those that do not" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002, p. 17). The pressure of accountability on principals of low-performing schools became more evident eight years later when the Race to the Top educational reform effort made the replacement of principals a requirement for schools undergoing federally funded turnarounds in three of the four turnaround models (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013). The high level of accountability on student outcomes continued when the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was enacted into law on December 10, 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

The educational reform efforts under both the Bush and Obama administrations have shed a spotlight on the urgency and crucial role of the principal in school improvement as stated by Finn and Broad, "Today's principals face a daunting situation: they shoulder greater responsibility than ever before—now typically including politics, security, public relations, finances, personnel, and technology" (Finn & Broad, 2003, p. 17). As a result, the emphasis on principal characteristics has changed over a period of time to reflect the new role of the principal. Duke (2004) states, "The principal who is ideal for opening a new school or improving an already high-performing school may not necessarily possess the qualities needed to turn around a persistently low-performing school" (p. 14).

This chapter provides a foundation associated with the importance of selecting an effective school principal to fill the critical leadership role in enhancing student achievement. It includes a general background for the study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research questions, and a brief overview of the methodology. These are followed by the definition of terms, delimitations, limitations, assumptions, and significance of the study.

The estimated percentage of all U.S. schools not making adequate yearly progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was 48% in 2011 (Center on Educational Policy, 2011). The rate of school improvement efforts to decrease that percentage was minimal as reflected by almost half the schools in the country not meeting AYP. "Despite steady increasing urgency about the nation's lowest-performing schools—those in the bottom five percent—efforts to turn these schools around have

largely failed. Marginal change has led to marginal (or no) improvement" (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007, p. 4). The bottom five percent of schools referenced in this body of research accounted for 5,000 of America's approximately 100,000 public schools.

At the state level, the Texas Education Agency assigns academic accountability ratings each year. The ratings are utilized to evaluate the academic performance of Texas public schools and are foundationally rooted in state assessment results and "are based largely on performance on state standardized tests and graduation rates" (Texas Education Agency, 2013). In the 2014 Comprehensive Biennial Report on Texas Public Schools, there were 110 districts and 733 campuses receiving a rating of *Improvement Required* (Texas Education Agency, 2015). The districts and campuses receiving an *Improvement Required* rating must show improvement in the next year. Principals are faced with a new sense of urgency, due to the pressures of accountability and school improvement, that may affect their decision to seek employment in another school district.

A recent report in the School Leaders Network (2014) highlighted that twenty-five thousand (one quarter of the country's principals) leave schools annually. In addition, 50% of the principals leave by the third year. The pacing of this principal turnover affects the district in multiple ways. Norton (2002) states "As though the intellectual and experience losses relative to principal turnover are not enough, the phenomenon of principal retention is costing school districts and taxpayers millions of dollars that would be welcomed in other budgets within the school district" (p. 51). The

replacement of the principals comes at an expense for the district both financially and academically. The estimated financial impact to a district is $75,000 for the "cost to develop, hire and onboard each principal" (School Leaders Network, 2014, p. 4).

The principal's departure also affects student learning on a campus. In a report commissioned by The Wallace Foundation on leadership influence, the principal is found to be "second only to teaching among school-related factors in its impact on student learning" (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 3). Furthermore, Marzano stated that the school leader's "effect on students contributes to 25 percent of the total school influences on a child's academic performance" (School Leaders Network, 2014, p. 3). The effect of campus leaders on student learning was redefining the role of the principal. In an era of accountability at the national, state, and local levels, the importance of school leadership is also increased to meet the standards and results set forth in our educational system.

The impact a school leader has on student learning coupled with the estimated cost to replace a new principal reflects the need for a school district to strategically staff schools led by highly effective principals who will drive the work of the school improvement efforts. Amid the pressures of tightened school budgets and expectations of closing of achievement gaps, the need arises for districts to become more strategic in selecting campus leaders to meet the national, state, and local goals of school improvement. In his dissertation, Cavazos (2012) asks, "If the principal is critical in improving student achievement, what are the competencies associated with an effective principal?" (p. 5). Although some have focused on the competencies to screen a

candidate, there is limited research on the district selection and placement practices. The importance of hiring and placing effective school leaders has warranted further research to determine how the school principal is selected for a campus. The methods will be addressed in this study.

Statement of the Problem

The principal role has been directly linked to the success or failure of a school as was highlighted by the current educational reform initiative of Race to the Top that called for principal replacement in three of the four turnaround models. Regarding this, Cavazos (2012) states, "Principals have always played an important role in education; however, the recent focus on improving academic achievement for all students has increased the urgency to select the best possible individuals for these positions" (p. 8). Furthermore, Murphy (2008) found that "The central factor [in a sharpbend] is 'leadership' for without it the potential of the people in the company is unlikely to be released, sustained, and directed effectively" (p. 80). If research indicates that leadership is central to effectiveness, school districts will have a need to become strategic in the hiring and placement of leaders to meet the demands of school improvement. As Cavazos (2012) maintains, "The increased demands and roles of school leaders make the selection process of principals a critical initial step in placing principals in schools" (p. 8). The area this study aimed to address is the selection method that the school district utilizes for the hiring of a campus principal. Does the school district use a specific method for selection? How are campus needs factored into the hiring process? What role do stakeholders such as the superintendent and director of human resources play in the

hiring process? Does the selection method matter when school improvement is needed?

Purpose of the Study

Selecting a high-quality principal to lead school improvement efforts is critical to a school district when accountability ratings are based on student achievement results. Cavazos (2012) states, "Principals are expected to account for raising the academic achievement of their pupils and the performance of their schools" (p. 3). Given that expectation, how does a school district select the best qualified candidate and then assign them to a campus to increase student achievement? Duke (2004) asserts, "The principal who is ideal for opening a new school or improving an already high-performing school may not necessarily possess the qualities needed to turn around a persistently low-performing school" (p. 14).

The purpose of this phenomenological case study to explore the effective selection and assignment practices of principals that resulted in rapid turnaround of schools that needed improvement in the levels of academic performance. For the purpose of this study, low-performing campuses are defined as campuses receiving a rating of *Improvement Required* under the performance index accountability system of the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The Division of School Improvement, formerly known as the Program Monitoring and Interventions Division, intervenes with districts and campuses that receive a rating of *Improvement Required*. The district and campuses are required to engage in improvement planning processes and are continuously monitored. If a campus receives an *Improvement Required* rating for two consecutive years, a campus turnaround plan must be submitted to the agency explaining how it will receive a *Met Standard*

rating in two years. Failing to do so will compel further sanctions placed on the campus and district.

Research Questions

The overarching research question that guided this study focused on the screening methods the school district utilized in matching the leadership characteristics of a principal to the needs of low-performing campuses. This study addressed the following research questions from the perspectives of district leaders:

1. What selection methods does a school district utilize to hire a campus principal for low-performing schools?
2. What methods does a school district utilize when assigning a principal to a low-performing campus?

Overview of Methodology

A qualitative methodology using a single case study design was applied to this study. This methodology allows for the exploration of the selection process by observing the how versus the why (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 4). Interviews were employed in discovering the *how* of the principal selection method utilized by a school district. Sipe and Constable (1996) state, "discourse assumes the form of dialogue between various knowers, as they attempt to describe and understand the world from the point of view of someone else" (p. 158).

This case study design was aligned to qualitative data collecting processes. The data sources collected during this study were interviews conducted with the participants of the study. The data collection included any archival documents that informed the

process that the district utilized in the hiring and placement practices of the campus leaders as well as field notes written during the study.

The participant roles that were essential to the study were the superintendent, the human resource representative(s), as well as recommendations by the superintendent of district leaders who had a direct involvement in the decisions to hire or select the principals. The human resource representative(s) was to be selected by whomever was serving as the primary staff member(s) responsible for the hiring and placement practices in the school district. The study included the hiring window of principals during the district's recruiting season.

The superintendent's recommendation only included the deputy superintendent. When the superintendent was asked for a recommendation on who to interview from the human resources department who had direct involvement in the hiring or selecting of campus principals, he determined that there would not be a need to interview a human resource representative to gain insight on the district's hiring practices. The superintendent stated that he would be able to address any questions regarding the district's hiring practices due to the final decision-making authority he had on who to hire as a campus principal.

Therefore, the two participant roles who had a direct involvement in the hiring or selection of the principals for the campuses that were low-performing whom were interviewed for this study included the superintendent and the deputy superintendent.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study the following definitions will apply.

Academically Acceptable was a rating assigned to a district or campus under the former state accountability system when student performance in Reading/ELA/Writing/Social Studies was ≥ 70%, Mathematics was ≥ 60%, and Science was ≥ 55% as well as meeting state requirements in completion rates and dropout rates.

Academically Unacceptable was a rating assigned to a district or campus under the former state accountability system that did not meet the minimum student performance standards as set by the state in addition to minimum standards set for completion rates and dropout rates.

Accountability Ratings are assigned annually by the Texas Education Agency to school districts and campuses that are based largely on performance on state standardized tests and graduation rates.

Accountability is the responsibility of academic student achievement in a school system.

Achievement refers to student performance on the state standardized test known as the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) and the meeting the proficiency goals.

Adequate yearly progress (AYP) is the measurement indicating whether a school met federally approved academic goals required by the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act/No Child Left Behind Act (ESEA/NCLB).

Campus Intervention Team is a requirement in the Texas Administration Code stipulating that this team shall be assigned to a campus when it is rated Improvement Required in the state accountability system.

Competencies are the sum of knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to perform the responsibilities of school principal.

Economically Disadvantaged are students that are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch or other public assistance.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 is a federal act reauthorizing federal spending on programs to support K-12 schooling. It is the eighth reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

Exemplary was a rating assigned to a district or campus under the former state accountability system when student performance in all tested subjects was ≥ 90% as well as meeting state requirement in completion rates and dropout rates.

FAST refers to the Financial Allocation Study for Texas that was used by the Comptroller's office to identify school districts and campuses that use resource allocation practices that contribute to high academic achievement and cost-effective operations.

FIRST is the Financial Integrity Rating System of Texas based on an analysis of the district's financial data.

Improvement Required is a rating under the current state accountability rating that is assigned to districts and campuses to indicate unacceptable performance due to not meeting targets on all required indices of their available performance data.

Lone Star Governance Training is a training developed by the Texas Education Agency to provide a continuous improvement model for governing teams that choose to intensively focus on one primary objective of improving student outcomes.

Low-performing campuses are defined as campuses receiving a rating of

Improvement Required under the performance index accountability system of the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

Met Standard is a state accountability rating that is assigned to districts and campuses to indicate acceptable performance as result of meeting the targets on all required indices for their available performance data.

No Child Left Behind was a federal law enacted in 2001 and reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965. The Act extended to include testing, accountability and school improvement in order for a district to receive federal funding.

Principal is a person who is assigned the leadership position of a school and who is responsible for guiding, directing, or influencing campus stakeholders.

Principal assignment refers to the method and criteria applied when assigning an individual to the campus principal position of a specific school.

Principal selection refers to the methods and criteria applied to choosing one individual from those candidates considered for a campus principal.

Race to the Top was a $4.35 billion competitive grant formed to encourage and reward innovation and reforms in state and local district K-12 education.

Recognized was a rating assigned to a district or campus under the former state accountability system when student performance in all tested subjects was ≥ 80% as well as meeting state requirement in completion rates and dropout rates.

Reconstitution is when the Commissioner of Education must order a campus to be reconstituted for being identified as academically unacceptable for two consecutive years. The Commissioner appoints a campus intervention team (CIT) to the district who will

decide which educators may be retained at the campus.

School turnaround is the dramatic change that produces significant achievement gains in a short period (two years) followed by a longer period of sustained school improvement.

Screening is the initial review by district's human resource department to ensure the applicant meets the basic requirements of the position.

Selection criteria are the standards, requirements, and competencies identified in evaluating the qualifications and characteristics of principal candidates.

Superintendent is the chief executive officer of the public school system who implements the school board's vision.

TEA is the Texas Education Agency, is a branch of the state government of Texas responsible for the primary and secondary public education in providing leadership, guidance, and resources to assist schools in meeting the needs of students

Delimitations

This study was designed to examine only one Texas school district which included student demographics of African American, White, Asian, American Indian, Pacific Islander, and Two or More Races reflected the state average between -.2 to +27. The Hispanic enrollment in the district is between 75 to 80% compared to 52.2% of state enrollment reflected a +22.8 to 27.8% difference. The percent of Economically Disadvantaged students in the district of 65 to 70% closely matched the state average by +7 to 11%. Additionally, the At-Risk population of the district reflected the state average by + 5 to 6%. The overall student enrollment per grade level is closely aligned to the

state average -1 to .3% from Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade. Therefore, the study is conducted in a specific time frame, location, and included a predetermined select group of participants. This study was comprised of the superintendent and district leaders who have had a direct involvement in the decisions to hire or select principals. Students will not be included in this study.

Limitations

Limitations of this study were those typically found in qualitative methodologies. The findings of the research will only apply to the school district being studied and may not be generalizable to other school districts. Additional limitations include research bias in collecting and researching data, a small number of selected participants, and a narrow focus on a single case study. However, a single case study design which includes a small number of selected participants will allow for depth in the research process.

Assumptions

This study will be based on two assumptions:

1. The interview participants will provide honest responses based on their experiences and understanding.
2. The inclusion criteria of the interview participants are appropriate and therefore, assures that they have experienced the same or comparable phenomenon of the study.

Significance of the Study

The study will document the process the school district used in the selection of a campus principal. The results of this study will provide superintendents and human

resource managers information that can be used for process alignment in the selection of principals by the human resource department of a school district. Because research shows that an effective school requires an effective leader, the selection of competent campus principal is imperative to the school improvement efforts. Where a handful of districts in Texas have reported that they have accomplished a turnaround in a short time frame, this single case study was intended to research a successful district and understand which practices in principal selection contributed to those results.

Summary

Chapter 1 provided a foundation for the role of the school principal and the critical nature of that role in a school accountability system. Research has indicated that an effective school is led by an effective leader. The additional parts of the chapter included the purpose and significance of the study, the research questions that guided the study, the delimitations and limitations, assumptions, and a brief overview of the methodology. Chapter 2 will provide a review of the literature on the historical background of educational reform efforts, a historical perspective of the school principal, and the impact of the principal on student learning. The chapter will also include the characteristics of effective school leaders and the selection of school principals.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

General Background

During the last thirty years of educational reform efforts, our nation's schools have experienced a shift in the approach to school accountability. Hallinger and Murphy (2013) state "Policies embedded in *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* represent the culmination of three decades of almost continuous education reform in the United States" (p. 1). A central source of measurement for school accountability in these reform efforts has been the results of standardized tests administered to students. The emphasis on this measure of accountability has shed a spotlight on the role of the school principal and the principal's impact on student learning. School district leaders face the task of selecting principals who will effectively lead the student learning efforts as reflected by an increase in student achievement rates, especially on low-performing campuses. Clifford (2012) states, "Hiring a new principal can affect the vitality and student achievement rates of a school" (p. 1). School district leaders must be strategic in selecting an effective principal given the past three education reform efforts focusing on student results as a method for measuring accountability. Thus, the selection and assignment practices are critical to a school district leader due to their impact on student learning in an era of heightened accountability.

Given the importance of the role of the principal and how he/she might affect student achievement, this study is designed to determine what selection and assignment practices are utilized by a school district in the hiring of a campus principal for a low-performing school.

Chapter 2 includes a literature review that provides a foundation for understanding how the role of the principal has changed and the importance of the selection process of an accountability system focused on student learning. The first section will provide a historical background on the most recent educational reform efforts in the last two decades that have focused on student results as a measure of accountability. The second section will review how the role of the principal has changed over the years and the additional responsibilities placed on that role. The third section will focus on the impact a principal has on student learning. The fourth section will highlight the competencies and characteristics that have been previously identified in the research of effective school leaders. The fifth section will include prior research on principal selection. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the extant literature.

Educational Reform Efforts and Increased Accountability

Over the past two decades, education reform efforts have focused on the results of student outcomes as a measure of accountability for schools receiving federal or state funding. As schools are measured on student achievement results, the role of the school principal is crucial to that measurement. Kafka (2009) states that "the principal has long been recognized as a, or even *the*, key player in school reform" (p. 319). If the key player in school reform is the principal, the education reform acts of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top have reinforced the accountability of that position in leading school improvement efforts.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was enacted in 2001 providing more funding flexibility to states while including increased accountability for student results.

The law included the requirement that "States must develop and implement a single, statewide accountability system that will be effective in ensuring that all districts and schools make adequate yearly progress, and hold accountable those that do not" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002, p. 17). The law further required corrective action plans and restructuring for schools not making adequate yearly progress, to include replacing school staff (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002).

The No Child Left Behind Act offered "states and school districts unprecedented flexibility in how they spend their education dollars, in return for setting standards for student achievement and holding students and educators accountable for results" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002, p. 3). This legislation was anchored on four key principles: "stronger accountability for results; greater flexibility for states, school districts and schools in the use of federal funds; more choices for parents of children from disadvantaged backgrounds; and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been demonstrated to work" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002, p. 9). States were required to create assessments to measure student progress in math and reading in grades 3–8 to address these four principles.

The assessment results would be disaggregated for students by poverty level, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002). The disaggregation of data in this manner was intended to ensure that no child was left behind and student achievement

gaps were closing. In addition, the assessment results would "allow parents, educators, administrators, policymakers, and the general public to track the performance of every school in the nation" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002, p. 9). The performance tracking would be reflected in annual school report cards that provided comparative information on school quality, and those not making adequate yearly progress toward the state proficiency goals would be targeted for assistance followed by corrective action and ultimately school restructuring (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002). The No Child Left Behind Act shed a spotlight on the role and quality of the school leader due to the quality of a school being measured by student achievement results coupled with the publication of those results. The school report card requirement that reflected school performance and statewide progress now reinforced the effectiveness of the school principal because it provided parents the "information about the quality of their children's schools, the qualifications of teachers, and their children's progress in key subjects" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., para. 4).

In the state of Texas, schools were assigned ratings annually based on school performance. The TEA annually assigns academic ratings that label schools as Exemplary, Recognized, Acceptable, or Unacceptable, which has shifted to the new school ratings of Met or Did Not Meet Standard. The current school rating system in Texas includes four indices based on student achievement, student progress, closing performance gaps, and postsecondary readiness (Texas Education Agency, 2013). These four indices reflected the importance of student learning. As Cavazos (2012) states,

"Regardless of whether the information in these reports is positive or negative, the principal remains at the center of this message and must explain the results to the stakeholders" (p. 3). The next educational reform that followed the No Child Left Behind Act retained the use of student achievement results as a measure of school accountability resulting in consequences for principals who did not meet standards on student achievement over a period of time. Therefore, the expectation of the school principal did not change in the next education reform as they remained the primary campus leader accountable for student learning.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 included a new education reform known as Race to the Top that was included a $4.35 billion investment designed as a grant program intended to improve student achievement (The White House, 2014). The purpose of Race to the Top was to offer "an invitation for states' best ideas on raising standards to prepare all students for college and careers, investing in America's teachers and school leaders, turning around the lowest-performing schools, and using data to inform support for educators and decision-making" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2014, p. 1).

The continued emphasis on increasing student achievement results remained at the forefront of responsibilities for the school principal in this education reform effort. It was to have a focus "on providing better support and resources for America's most important leaders: teachers and principals. Under these grants, schools and districts are making sure we have excellent principals leading our schools" (The White House, 2014, p. 7). Race to the Top focused on designing and implementing rigorous standards and

assessments, teacher and leader recruitment and retention efforts, supporting data systems that improved instruction, using effective approaches to turn-around struggling schools, and demonstrating and sustaining educational reform (The White House, 2009). The intended use of the investment in Race to the Top was to turn around the nation's 5,000 poorest-performing schools over a span of five years (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010). Schools were required to use one of the four turnaround models: turnaround, restart, school closure, or transformation as a result of school turnaround serving as an option to one of the reforms efforts promoted by Race to the Top (Kutash et al., 2010). From these, three of the four turnaround models require the replacement of the campus principal.

The previous three decades of education reform efforts have heightened the accountability measures at the district and campus levels due to the focus on student results. Kafka (2009) states "as government officials, policymakers, and district leaders increasingly seek to hold schools individually accountable for student achievement, they inevitably focus on the individual leaders of those schools—the principal—as agents of success or sources of failure" (p. 319). The role and responsibilities of the principal have expanded from the time when principals were first referred to as the principal teacher in the early 19th century as the level of accountability was increased for student achievement. Now the principal of the 21st century is being referred to as school leaders who "have, in effect, become CEOs of small public businesses whose chief product is learning" (Finn & Broad, 2003, p. 17).

Background of the School Principal

Although the role of the school principal has broadened and changed over time, the impact the role has on student learning has not changed. The education reform efforts over the past three decades remained consistent in keeping the spotlight on the principals and the accountability of that role on student learning. As McGhee and Nelson (2005) note, "school leaders, whose performance was once assessed using a variety of indicators that reflected the complexity of the job, are now finding their effectiveness determined in much narrower terms" (p. 368).

The role of the principal has experienced a shift in responsibilities over time as changes occurred in areas such as student enrollment, increased federal involvement, and academic standards. A report by the Institute for Educational Leadership (2000) described the principal's responsibilities of the past as needing to "comply with district-level edicts, address personnel issues, order supplies, balance program budgets, keep hallways and playgrounds safe, put out fires that threatened tranquil public relations, and make sure that busing and meal services were operating smoothly" (p. 2). These responsibilities were an extension of the initial role of teachers who were performing principal duties. As Rousmaniere (2007) states, "Before there was a principal's office, the school was essentially the teacher, and that teacher worked as instructor and building manager" (p. 7). Thus, the influence on student learning was limited to those that the instructor had in the single classroom school which gradually changed over time.

The role of the "principal teacher" was created in the early 19th century when grade-level classes were established due to schools becoming larger and moving away from having a single teacher (Kafka, 2009). The responsibilities included classroom

assignments, student discipline, building maintenance, attendance, and ensuring the school hours were maintained, as well as other duties that kept the school functioning (Kafka, 2009). As the enrollment of students increased, the need to expand the role and responsibilities of the principal teacher was amplified.

The expanded role of the principal teacher began to be elevated to an authoritative role in the school as student enrollment increased over time. As a result, the principal teacher role morphed into the role of a principal eliminating teaching duties. As reported by Rousmaniere (2007), "The first principals' positions were created in mid-nineteenth century urban districts to address the organizational demands of the new graded school where students were classified by age and achievement and placed in separate classrooms under a single teacher" (p. 7). In the transitioning from the role of the principal teacher to principal, the school's academic programs were of limited responsibility due to the expectation of first ensuring that the school operations were managed effectively (Catano & Stronge, 2006). Moving into the 20th and 21st centuries, the broadening of responsibilities of the school principal continued. Newton's study of principals (as cited in Cavazos, 2012) reported that in the late 1900s, societal changes, joined by economic and political climate changes, allowed political and business leaders to redefine the principal's role, which resulted in new demands established.

The new demands primarily included the focus on standardized testing as a measure for school achievement in the education reform efforts of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. From the early 19th century to the 21st century, the responsibility for student learning remained on the shoulders of the principal teacher or principal on the

school campus and now included responsibilities added over the years. Finn and Broad (2003) state,

> Today, however, while all of those old responsibilities endure, the principal's main task has evolved into something very different: to develop a vision of learning; to build a school culture and instructional programs conducive to learning for all pupils; to manage staff, students, and parents with needs and problems that did not exist or were largely ignored in the past; and, above all, to produce excellent academic results as gauged by external measures such as state proficiency tests keyed to statewide academic standards (p. 17).

At the present time, the responsibilities still include the oversight and management of student learning and the school building joined by the added emphasis on improving student achievement. However, the expectation to become instructional leaders was heightened as research indicated that the impact of the principal on student learning was second only to classroom instruction (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 5).

Principal Impact on Student Learning

Student learning is one of the school goals that principals have continued to affect, whether positively or negatively. As Norton states (2002), "Studies on school effectiveness, school climate, and student achievement all reveal one commonality, the fact that good happenings in schools depend to a great extent on the quality of school leadership" (p. 50). The principal's impact on student learning has resonated across school districts as educational reform efforts continue utilizing standardized testing results as a source of measurement for school accountability. The results from

standardized tests function as a data source used for the measurement of what the student learns in one year based on the academic standards set by the state.

The student learning environment in the school is a responsibility of the principal and the manner in which it is fostered has the potential to affect school accountability ratings. As reported by Branch, Hanushek and Rivkin (2013), "highly effective principals raise the achievement of a typical student in their schools by between two and seven months of learning in a single year; ineffective principals lower achievement by the same amount" (p. 1). This impact on student learning, joined by the school accountability measurement, reflects the critical nature of the instructional leader role of the principal. The 2009 report by the Strategic Management of Human Capital describes the role of the principal in reform efforts:

> Principals bear the ultimate responsibility for implementing school-wide reforms that will lead to high academic achievement for all students. The principal must assume many roles: building leader, education visionary, disciplinarian, community builder, budget analyst, facility manager, and guardian of legal, contractual and policy mandates, but none is more important than instructional leader (p. 5).

The importance of the instructional leader role of the principal has changed alongside the educational reform efforts. Mark and Printy (2003) state, "Instructional leadership, developed during the effective schools movement of the 1980s, viewed the principal as the primary source of educational expertise" (p. 372). Now seen in this light, the principal was positioned as the expert on instruction, which included expanding the

knowledge and skills base of teachers. A study by Richardson, Watts, Hollis, and McLeod (2016) noted "Principals must also be effective facilitators of professional learning" (p. 77). Additionally, they reasoned "changing schools require that school principals navigate and lead shifts in structures, politics, human resources, and the culture of teaching, leading, and learning" (p. 78).

Educational research on the impact of the principal on student learning was surfacing as school accountability focused on student achievement. A study by Adamowski, Bowles Therriault, and Cavanna (2007) reports that "a quarter century of research confirms that the two most important school-linked variables in boosting achievement are teacher quality and principal leadership" (p. 12). The study paralleled the research that reported the impact of principals on student learning is second only to instruction, the highest return in elementary schools and high-poverty, high-minority schools (Leithwood et al., 2004).

The impact of leadership on student achievement was studied by Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2004) and the findings were that, "More specifically, some studies reported the effect size for leadership and achievement as high as .50, which translates mathematically into a one-standard-deviation difference in demonstrated leadership ability correlating with a 19 percentile point increase in student achievement" (p. 50). By research indicating how the role of the principal can affect student learning, what makes a principal an effective school leader?

Effective School Leaders

The examination of effective school leadership is a focus of continued interest as

research reflects its impact on student learning emphasized by education reform efforts employing student achievement as a method for measuring school effectiveness. The responsibilities and characteristics of effective school leaders have been identified in various research studies.

Waters et al. (2004) found the following areas of responsibilities that correlated to high levels of student achievement:

- Culture: fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation.
- Order: establishes a set of standard operating procedures and routines.
- Discipline: protects teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching time or focus.
- Resources: provides teachers with the materials and professional development necessary for the successful execution of their jobs.
- Curriculum, instruction, and assessment: is directly involved in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices.
- Knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment: is knowledgeable about current practices.
- Focus: establishes clear goals and keeps these goals at the forefront of the school's attention.
- Visibility: has high-quality contact and interactions with teachers and students.
- Contingent rewards: recognizes and rewards individual accomplishments
- Communication: establishes strong lines of communication with teachers and

students.

- Outreach: is an advocate and spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders.
- Input: involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies.
- Affirmation: recognizes and celebrates school accomplishments and acknowledges failures.
- Relationship: demonstrates empathy with teachers and staff on a personal level.
- Change agent role: is willing and prepared to actively challenge the status quo.
- Optimizer role: inspires and leads new and challenging innovations.
- Ideals and beliefs: communicates and operates from strong ideals and beliefs about schooling.
- Monitoring and evaluation: monitors the effectiveness of school practices and their impact on student learning.
- Flexibility: adapts his or her leadership behavior to the needs of the current situation and is comfortable with dissent.
- Situational awareness: is aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems.
- Intellectual stimulation: ensures that faculty and staff are aware of the most current theories and practices in education and makes the discussion of these

practices integral to the school's culture (pp. 49–50).

As stated in the findings of the study, there were direct leadership abilities that increased student achievement by 19 percentile points (Waters et al., 2004, p. 50). The study maintained the impact an effective leader had on student learning. Another research study indicated what the highly effective principals had in common.

The identification of classroom instruction and school leadership serving as factors affecting student learning, a study conducted by the Center for Public Education (2012) found that schools led by highly effective principals:

- Perform 5 to 10 percentage points higher than if they were led by an average principal
- Have fewer student and teacher absences
- Have effective teachers stay longer
- Typically replace ineffective teachers with more effective teachers
- Have principals who are more likely to stay for at least three years
- Have principals who have at least three years of experience at that school (as cited in Hull, 2012, p. 1).

These studies reflect the behaviors and characteristics of an effective school leader and the importance of that role in impacting student achievement. Hull (2012) states that leadership stability positively impacts school performance but "Unfortunately, our lowest performing schools serving our most disadvantaged students have the least stable leadership" (p. 6). In addition, Hull (2012) asserts "less effective teachers tend to leave under an effective principal, while more effective teachers tend to leave when the

school is taken over by an ineffective principal" (p. 1).

In a 2008 report by Public Impact, it is noted "school turnaround is possible, but it takes a broader, concerted effort with daring leadership at the helm and persistent, achievement-oriented collaboration among staff" (p. 3). The study found that the following actions conducted by successful turnaround leaders included:

- Identify and focus on a few early wins with big payoffs, and use that early success to gain momentum. While these "wins" are limited in scope, they are high-priority, not peripheral, elements of organization performance.
- Break organization norms or rules to deploy new tactics needed for early wins. Failed rules and routines are discarded when they inhibit success.
- Act quickly in a fast cycle of trying new tactics, measuring results, discarding failed tactics, and doing more of what works (see diagram). Time is the enemy when the status quo is failure (p. 5).

The research by Public Impact (2008) labeled these three areas as actions that were critical and consistent to school success. These actions were followed by the identification of four clusters of competence of effective leaders that included, "driving for results, influencing for results, problem solving and showing confidence to lead" (p. 8).

The selection of effective leaders becomes a critical hiring practice as research was providing a portrait of an effective leader and their impact on student achievement. In an era of heightened accountability, the hiring practices may directly or indirectly affect the accountability ratings that are assigned at the campus and district levels.

Clifford (2012) states, “When making hiring decisions, superintendents and school boards must consider the future of their district and schools” (p. 1).

The education reform efforts focused federal grant funding, specifically $3.5 billion in school improvement grants, to improve low performing schools thus increasing the urgency in hiring an effective leader to improve school performance. Richardson et al. (2016) notes “One focus of these grants was an explicit need for turnaround principals. These principals are charged with replacing ineffective principals and quickly improving low-performing public schools” (p. 72). The charge for quick school improvement heightens the necessity of the selection of an effective leader who can be successful in the context of the school. Hallinger (2011) suggests “that leadership can be an important catalyst and supporting factor for school improvement, but that the school-level conditions, whether referred to as, ‘academic improvement capacity’ always exercises an even stronger influence on leadership” (p. 133). The school district’s hiring practices are challenged by selecting an effective leader who can work amidst the school’s conditions to result in school improvement. Clifford (2012) states “Currently, there appears to be no algorithm for determining the match between candidates and schools” (p. 4).

Selection of Principals

The continued focus on school accountability and research supporting the impact the campus principal has on student achievement has positioned the principal at the forefront of school improvement. The variance in the methods by which these principals are selected is minimal. Palmer, Kelly, and Mullooly (2016) note “Although the school principal’s role has been growing in importance, the methods used to select principals

have changed little since the 1950s" (p. 26). As a result, the selection methods for principals includes commonalities in district's hiring process. A report supported by the Broad Foundation states four basic components of the multi-step hiring process which includes: (1) recruitment from both internal and external sources, (2) initial eligibility screening, (3) district competency screening, and (4) school-fit panel interviews that conclude in the superintendent or designee formally approving the hire (The New Teacher Project, 2006, p. 4). Research has found commonalities of district hiring cultures, Palmer et al. (2016) stated:

> Throughout principal selection literature, four salient points are common: (a) the principal is an important determinant of student achievement, (b) procedures used to select principals are highly subjective and not commensurate with the importance of the role of the principal, (c) principal selection has not been widely interrogated by researchers, and (d) inequity is a prevalent occurrence within principal selection (p. 27).

The hiring window may not allow the time for effective selection methods caused by the urgency in replacing ineffective leaders to quickly turn around a low-performing school. A study published by the American Institute for Research states "districts do not allot enough time or resources to making the appropriate match between local school/district leadership needs and candidates' demonstrated skills and abilities" (Clifford, 2012, p. 4). This is evident when the superintendent can articulate which responsibilities are important but does not have a method for their measurement. In a study by Rammer (2007), he states "the 21 responsibilities identified by Waters et al.

(2004) were considered important by the superintendent but they didn't describe purposeful or intentional means to assess those responsibilities in principal candidates" (p. 73). This was further validated in a study by Schlueter and Walker (2008) where they observed "fewer than half of the districts (46%) did not use criteria for the selection of their principals" (p. 14). Kwan and Walker (2009) further added "In reality, the final decision may be reduced as much to whom you know as what you know" (p. 58).

As the field of study expands in school leadership, researchers have provided a schematic of the effective school leader of the 21st century. In a study published by Quality School Leadership, Elmore and Burney (2000) state,

> Leadership transitions provide opportunities for organizational growth and development. In the field of education, choosing an effective school principal is one of the most significant decisions that a superintendent or school board can make, as new leadership can propel a district forward in meeting its goals (as cited by Clifford, 2012, p. 1).

The job of the principal has changed over time due in part to the past three decades of educational reform efforts to quickly improve student achievement. As a result, "Effective recruitment and selection of school administrators continue to be one of the more challenging human resource tasks in educational organizations" (Normore, 2004, p. 3). This challenge is further compounded by studies indicating that, "a principal has enough of an impact on a school that replacing an ineffective principal with an effective one could have a significant impact. The key would be hiring a principal with enough experience and a proven record of effectiveness" (Hull, 2012, p. 1).

The identification of principals and their effectiveness becomes challenging when you have candidates exhibiting homogeneous backgrounds. Steiner and Hassel (2011) note "When two seemingly similar candidates are hired—with the same level of education, experience, and technical skills—one sometimes turns out to be an outstanding performer, while the other struggles" (p. 2). The development of principal competencies by Harvard University professor and cognitive psychologist Dr. David McClelland resulted from trying to understand how two candidates possessing similar backgrounds resulted in different outcomes. His interest was also in response to studies that were reflecting "standard ways of evaluating job candidates—IQ tests and other tests of academic aptitude, knowledge content tests, school grades, and academic credentials—did not fully predict job performance and were often biased against minorities, women, and people in poverty" (Steiner & Hassel, 2011, p. 4). Utilizing Dr. McClelland's work, the Hay Group developed the following model to show how competencies related to qualifications (Steiner & Hassel, 2011, p. 5):

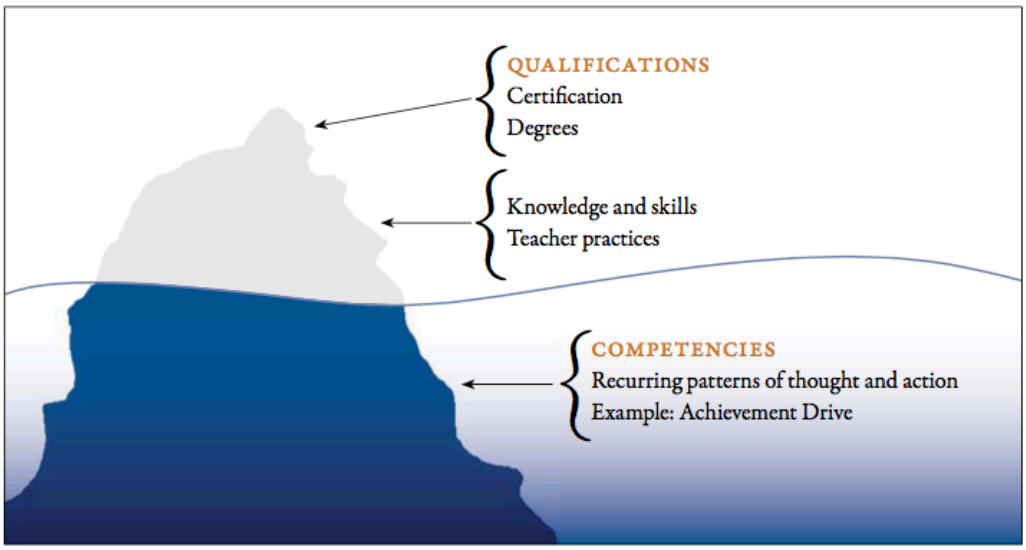

FIGURE 1: Observable characteristics versus underlying competencies (Adapted from "The Iceberg Model" in Spencer & Spencer, *Competence at Work*, p. 11.)

Figure 1. *Observable Characteristics Versus Underlying Competencies. Reprinted from* Using competencies to improve school turnaround principal success*, Retrieved April 1, 2017, from www.DardenCurry.org. Copyright 2011 by Public Impact & University of Virginia's Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education. Reprinted with permission.*

The model represented the underlying competencies that are more challenging to reveal. Building upon this review of the literature in organizational turnaround by Public Impact, the University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education (UVA/PLE) developed a student achievement-based model. The competencies were detected through the behavioral event interview (BEI) process, which is a "particular type of interview that allows candidates' suitability for a position to emerge by measuring their competencies, which are ways of behaving, acting, and feeling that support a person's performance in a particular role" (Hitt, 2015, p. 1).

Below is an overview of the model that captures the "behaviors that matter" for turnaround; the second model is utilized by UVA/PLE to partner with local and state education agencies (Hitt, 2015):

Public Impact Model: *Competencies Based on Review of Research on Organizational Turnaround Outside of Education*	**UVA/PLE Model:** *Competencies Based on Both Public Impact Model and Student Achievement Data of High-Performing Turnaround Principals*
Demonstrating Achievement	Focusing on Sustainable Results
Demonstrating Initiative and Persistence	
Planning Ahead	
Monitoring and Directiveness	Holding People Accountable for Performance
Developing Others	
Impacting and Influencing	Impacting and Influencing
Demonstrating Team Leadership	Engaging the Team
Showing Self-Confidence	Committing to Students
Thinking Conceptually	Thinking Conceptually
Thinking Analytically	Thinking Analytically

Figure 2. *Behaviors that Matter. Reprinted from* "What it Takes" for a turnaround: Principal competencies that matter for student achievement*, Retrieved April 1, 2017, from www.DardenCurry.org. Copyright 2015 by Center on School Turnaround at WestEd & University of Virginia Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education. Reprinted with permission.*

The report by Hitt (2015) finds that local and state education agencies have utilized the BEI and its competency approach "as a way to inform principal selection, principal to school matching, and principal development. These SEAs and local education agencies (LEAs) report they are forecasting applicants' suitability for turnaround leadership better than ever" (Hitt, 2015, p. 1). Further noted in the report "if the district has insight into the areas that matter for turnaround, as well as where the principal needs additional support and development, the district could help strengthen the principal's skills parallel to the onboarding process" (p. 5).

Hitt (2015) states "Much remains uncertain about the challenging work of turnaround, but one facet of the process that has become clearer is that a high-quality principal selection process should include more than a traditional interview and review of application materials" (p. 17). The UVA/PLE (2011) asserts that "Research on successful turnaround efforts in other sectors and evidence from turnaround efforts in 15 states affirm that effective turnaround leaders engage in specific actions that drive, enable and sustain dramatic change" (p. 3). This is further validated by Kowal and Hassel (2005) as they state, "Successful turnaround leaders can be defined in two ways: by their specific actions and by the behavioral characteristics or competencies that lead them to act in certain ways" (p. 20).

With the extensive research on school leadership, how are districts utilizing the studies to strategically select and place a campus principal on a low-performing campus? According to Doyle and Locke (2014), "Yet far too little is known about how districts go about identifying talent, enlisting the best candidates for the job, and matching their distinctive skills and capabilities to the needs of specific schools" (p. 3).

Districts also need to be as systematic about selecting and placing principals as they are about recruiting them. As characterized by Player, Hitt and Robinson (n.d.), "A well-prepared district is willing to prioritize the needs of turnaround schools and provide them with the resources they need, even if it means adjusting entrenched district structures and norms" (p. 6). As Cavazos (2012) states, "Principals have always played an important role in education; however, the recent focus on improving academic achievement for all students has increased the urgency to select the best possible

individuals for these positions" (p. 8). Although research has been conducted on the screening for effective school principal characteristics, the selection and assignment practices of campus principals has not been addressed as extensively.

Summary

The review of the literature revealed how the role of the principal has expanded from the 19th century principal teacher role to the 21st century instructional leader. The expansion was a result of changing demographics and school campus needs over time but the more impactful change resulted from the education reform efforts and accountability measures that were reviewed in the literature. The historical background of the role of the principal and the impact on student learning exhibited how the two became interwoven into school accountability.

The literature review of effective school leader characteristics exhibited the extensive research that has been conducted over time. Therefore, the question of what district selection and assignment practices are utilized for matching a campus principal to a low-performing campus is important due to the impact the leader has on student learning. In addition, there are limited studies that focus on selection and assignment practices of principals.

Chapter 3 will include the methodology of this study. It will describe the design, population sample, the instrument for data collection, data analysis procedures, and quality measures.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Procedures

The role of the principal and the standards of effectiveness have changed resulting from a growing student population, student demographic changes and educational reform initiatives centered on student achievement results. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research methodology and procedures selected for this study. It will cover the following sections: (1) description of population and sample, (2) selection of institution, (3) selection of participants, (4) data collection instruments, (5) data collection procedures, and (6) data analysis procedures.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this case study was to examine the district's selection methods and assignment practices of campus principals for low performing schools. The overarching research question guiding this study is: What selection method is the school district utilizing in leveraging the leadership competencies of a principal to the needs of low-performing campuses?

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What selection methods does a school district utilize to hire a campus principal for low performing schools?
2. What methods does a school district utilize when assigning a principal to a low-performing campus?

This research study focused on providing an understanding of the following questions: How are principals assigned to low-performing schools? Are they specifically selected for low-performing schools? Does the school district use a tailored method for

selection? How are campus needs factored into the hiring process? What role do stakeholders, such as the superintendent and director of human resources, play in the hiring process? Does the selection method matter when school improvement is needed? These questions were utilized to highlight the methods the school district leaders applied in the selection and assignment of principals.

Research Method and Design

This study employed a qualitative method, through a single case study design process, to identify the district hiring methods for selection and assignment practices of principals on low-performing campuses. The qualitative method of study allowed for a "focus on holistic descriptions of learners in naturalistic settings" and for the collection of data through an interview method (Anderman, 2009, p. 2-3).

The qualitative methodology provided a means to study cases in depth by allowing an understanding and description of personal experiences while permitting the researcher to study dynamic processes (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Hays and Singh (2012) explain that, "The guiding purposes of qualitative research in generating knowledge, then, are description, attention to process, and collaboration within social context and its people" (p. 4).

Merriam (2009) states, "Applied research is undertaken to improve the quality of practice of a particular discipline" (p. 3). This aligns to the purpose of the study to identify the selection methods and placement practices utilized by districts in hiring campus principals.

Further, the study will use a single case study design as Yin's (2014) definition

explains, "a case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. xxvii). The case study design was the best method to answer research questions that identified the process of principal selection at a district level.

The researcher was able to utilize the perspective of an insider in conducting the interviews and in analyzing the data due to a background as a central office administrator and school turnaround consultant. The researcher recognized that the knowledge produced from this methodology may not be generalized to other people or other settings and that it is difficult to make quantitative predictions (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 20).

Description of Population and Sample

A purposive sampling process was used to identify the superintendent and human resource personnel responsible for the selection and placement of principals. The district had several campuses that needed improvement in the levels of academic performance and then showed a rapid turnaround of schools. Hays and Singh (2012) state that, "The intention of purposive sampling is to select participants for the amount of detail they can provide about a phenomenon, and not simply selecting participants to meet a certain sample size" (p. 8).

Selection of Institution

The selection of the institution was based on it meeting the following criteria: a large district in Texas reflecting a student population of over 10,000 students that comparably resembled the student demographics of the state of Texas. The district was

made up of 37 elementary campuses, 12 middle schools, 8 high schools, and 3 special campuses. The district staff included over 2,300 teachers led by 160 campus administrators.

The district's economically disadvantaged student population is between 65 to 70%, compared to the state's population of 59%. The district's at-risk student population is at 55 to 60%, while the state's is 50.3%. The student demographics are African American 4 to 9% (state 12.6%), Hispanic 75 to 80% (state 52.4%), White 13 to 18% (state 28.1%), American Indian 0.1 to 0.5% (state 0.4%), Asian 2 to 7% (state 4.2%), Pacific Islander 0.1 to 0.5% (state 0.1%), and Two or More Races 0.6 to .11% (state 2.1%) (Texas Education Agency website, 2007–2015, p. 18).

The district must have had several campuses receiving a rating of *Improvement Required* under the performance index accountability system of the Texas Education Agency (TEA) due to not meeting targets on all the index categories of Student Achievement, Student Progress, Closing Performance Gaps, and Post-Secondary Readiness. In addition, the campuses receiving the *Improvement Required* rating must have showed rapid, substantial improvement.

Selection of Participants

Participants selected for this research study were two district leaders who had been employed at the district for three or more years. The participants were selected on the recommendation of the superintendent based on their direct involvement in the decisions to hire or select principals. In addition, the participants had direct involvement in the process for campus principals who were interviewed and/or assigned to their

respective campuses.

The superintendent only recommended the deputy superintendent due to his ability to answer the district's hiring protocols based on his former role, which included oversight of the human resource department. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format and audio recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis. The interviews were held in their respective offices.

Data Collection Instruments

A single case study design may include multiple data collection instruments. Baxter and Jack (2008) explain, that "Potential data sources may include, but are not limited to: documentation, archival records, interviews, physical artifacts, direct observations, and participant-observation" (p. 554). Interviews were the primary data collection instrument because the participants in the study were able to provide the amount of detail that was needed to identify principal selection and placement practices. The research interview allows for professional conversations about everyday life where knowledge is constructed (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

The second data collection instrument utilized was the review of documentation to include human resource employee handbook, district policy on employment practices, hiring protocols, interview guides, state accountability ratings and student assessment data, and district accountability plans. Documents were reviewed to understand the district hiring protocols and state of the school in regard to the district's academic performance and accountability ratings. These will be used to, "help understand the culture and context of participant's experiences of a phenomenon" (Hays & Singh, 2012,

p. 287).

All participant identifiers and responses were protected through the strictest level of confidentiality. Pseudonyms were applied at time of the consent to replace personal identifiers and provide participants anonymity.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher completed the human subjects' research training, financial conflicts of interest training, and submitted a financial interest disclosure form. These steps were followed as a requirement of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval process from the university. To ensure the protection of rights, privacy and welfare of participants, the researcher applied for review and received approval from the IRB at The University of Texas at Austin.

The researcher requested and received formal approval from the district prior to contacting participants. The researcher contacted the selected participants and followed district protocols to acquire approval to conduct the external research study. The protocol included the submission of an external research application, a copy of the University of Texas IRB proposal, interview protocol, and written consent, which had to be submitted for the district's IRB approval process according to the district's board policy guidelines. Once the university and the school district granted permission to conduct the research, the researcher solicited interviews from the study participants.

The researcher sent a recruitment letter electronically to the school district superintendent. The letter contained the purpose, intent, and study methods, as well as the consent waiver form. The interviews were conducted in a face-to-face format. The

interviews were scheduled at a time and location most convenient for the participants and conducive to sharing knowledge in a location which had minimal distractions. The purpose of the initial meeting that included the deputy superintendent, at the recommendation of the superintendent, was to generate background information from the participant and to describe the process of the study.

The interviews were 60 to 90 minutes in length. The researcher took anecdotal notes during the interview. At the beginning of the interview, participants were provided a consent form allowing the interview and audio recording. Upon receiving permission from the participants, the interview was audio recorded using the researcher's iPhone 7 Voice Memos application and transcribed by a paid transcriber. The participants were provided a copy of their transcriptions for review of accuracy; this was done in order to promote trustworthiness between the researcher and participants. All data obtained from the interview and documentation review process was stored in a locked file cabinet. Access was limited to the researcher.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis for this study was a consistent process that began with the initial collection of data. Baxter and Jack (2008) state that the, "Triangulation of data sources, data types or researchers is a primary strategy that can be used and would support the principle in case study research that the phenomena be viewed and explored from multiple perspectives" (p. 556).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed using the Rev Voice Recorder: Audio Transcription and Dictation Application for the iPhone. The researcher took

anecdotal notes during the interviews. The transcripts and notes were printed for coding purposes. The transcripts were provided to the participants to ensure that they accurately reflected their responses. The informed consent waiver form was emailed to the two study participants and the researcher received oral consent of their participation in the study. The interviews were held in the respective offices of the superintendent and deputy superintendent.

The two types of processes that were used in the interview transcripts were open coding and axial coding to compare similarities and differences. Hays and Singh (2012) define open coding as "a type of wide review of the data answering the question 'What large domains am I seeing in the data?' (p. 345). The open coding process was followed by axial coding which is "a process that begins to refine the open coding and examine relationships among the large open codes to understand more in-depth what the data are revealing" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 345). The two coding procedures assisted in the development of themes that emerged from the study. The themes and coding structure were shared and reviewed by one of the members of the researcher's committee.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the research method and design, description of population and sample, selection of institution, selection of participants, data collection instruments, data collection procedures and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 presents the findings of this qualitative study.

Chapter Four: Findings

The methods and procedures described in chapter three were utilized to examine the district's selection and assignment practices of campus principals for low-performing schools. This study utilized a combination of data collection, archival notes, semi-structured interviews and field notes. This chapter presents the findings of understanding how these practices contributed to the rapid turnaround of schools that needed improvement in the levels of academic performance of students.

The anonymity of the selected school district and selected participants was protected by assigning them pseudonyms. For the past four years, Easton Smith has been the superintendent in Mason ISD, a large urban district in southern Texas. Hailey Garcia has served as the deputy superintendent in the same school district for the past three years. The participants and school district will be referenced by these pseudonyms throughout the study.

From the perspectives of school district leaders, the following two research questions guided the study:

1) What selection methods does a school district utilize to hire a campus principal for low performing schools?

2) What methods does a school district utilize when assigning a principal to a low-performing campus?

This chapter details the selection and assignment methods that were applied by district leaders in selecting principals for the campuses that had received a state accountability rating of *Improvement Required*. The chapter first provides an overview

of the school district, including the organizational structures and the state of the school district regarding ratings received from the state accountability rating system, as well as a description of the participants of the study. It then describes the criteria used by the school district in decisions regarding the hiring of district personnel as well as its screening methods. Next, it offers a description of the four main levers of change in the University of Virginia's School Turnaround Program ("UVA School Turnaround Approach," n.d.). These levers of change were used to organize the themes that emerged from the district's selection and assignment methods that contributed to the improvement of the school's rating of *Improvement Required* to *Met Standard*. The research findings will be presented at the end of the chapter and will include a preview of Chapter 5.

Overview of the School District

Mason ISD is a large urban district located in Texas and is the largest of five public school districts in its city limits. The school district is the second largest employer of the city made up of over 6,000 full-time, substitute, and temporary employees. The school district boundary covers over 65 square miles, it serves over 38,000 students on 55 to 60 campuses for students enrolled in Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade. These campuses are comprised of over 35 elementary schools serving approximately 18,500 students, 10 to 15 middle schools serving over 8,400 students, 6 to 10 high schools serving over 11,000 and 2 to 4 special campuses serving over 400 students. The three special campuses include a campus serving students having multiple disabilities, a campus for the district's disciplinary alternative education program, and a campus for serving high school students who prefer a special setting for reasons of employment,

family responsibilities, or other challenges.

The student demographics are 75 to 80 percent Hispanic, 13 to 18 percent White, 4 to 9 percent African-American, and 2 to 7 percent Asian. The district student enrollment of over 38,000 is comprised of 25,000 students identified as economically disadvantaged, over 21,000 students are at risk of dropping out of school, and over 2,300 are English language learners. In addition, more than 9,000 are mobile students who have been enrolled at a school in the district for less than 83% of the school year.

Mason ISD was a district that had been assigned state accountability ratings of *Academically Acceptable* or *Met Standard* ratings since 2004 (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2007–2015). In 2010, Mason ISD had 18 campuses rated *Exemplary*, 29 campuses rated *Recognized,* ten campuses rated *Academically Acceptable* and only one campus rated *Academically Unacceptable*. In the time following a leadership change, the district found itself owning 18 schools receiving a state accountability rating of *Improvement Required* in 2013. Schools received this rating when they did not meet one of the four indices of the state accountability system: student achievement, student progress, closing the performance gaps, and postsecondary readiness.

When Easton Smith was named Superintendent of Mason ISD in 2014, he inherited 11 of the 18 schools which had a state accountability rating of *Improvement Required* while the remaining campuses received a *Met Standard* rating. There was a culture of low expectations among these schools and he identified the root cause by stating:

The condition of the lowest performing schools included a lot of turnover, a lot of

> deficit thinking of 'this part of town' and 'these kids aren't just ever going to quite reach the standard.' The school themselves, facility-wise, they were nice schools and some were even new schools. It was more of an issue of leadership and teacher accountability.

The deputy superintendent additionally noted that the school district community was aware of the challenges in the low-performing schools as she recollects:

> When I looked at the core levels of effective leaders, the culture wasn't there. I mean there was one school, the community knew that it was a very unsafe school; so much that there was an applicant who came to sign her contract with the district and when she found out what school she was going to be at, she declined the contract.

Having a culture of low expectations and community perceptions of unsafe schools, seven of the 18 schools were also required to go through a reconstitution process as mandated by the commissioner of education. Reconstitution is an intervention that was included in part of the statute in the Texas Education Code that required a campus to be reconstituted if it had been identified as unacceptable for two consecutive years under the state's accountability rating system.

The reconstitution of a campus contained the requirement for a campus intervention team to assist the campus in the developing an updated the targeted improvement plan. The campus intervention team also determined which teachers and principals may be retained at the campus. A principal who had previously been on the campus during the time described in the statute could be removed unless the intervention

team determined the removal would be harmful to student achievement and campus stability. Teachers of a core subject tested by the state assessment instrument could be retained only if the intervention team determined that significant academic gains had be achieved. If the decision was made to not retain the teacher, the teacher could be reassigned to another position in the district.

The plan also required approval by the school board and required to be presented in a public hearing. The district improvement plan was then submitted to the commissioner for approval. The superintendent describes his first-year obligations:

> I am now in my fourth year as a superintendent in this district and I walked in to having to reconstitute in my first year, seven schools. We had 11 *Improvement Required* schools but even the year before that there were 18 *Improvement Required* campuses before I became superintendent. We were able to get that down to four. The four schools were four-year *Improvement Required* schools.

Table 1

School Accountability Ratings by School Year

	2013	2014	MISD Board of Directors appoint Easton Smith as Superintendent in August 2014	2015	2016	2017
ES 1	IR	IR		Met	Met	Met
ES 2	IR	Met		IR	Met	Met
ES 3	IR	IR		Met	Met	Met
ES 4	Met	Met		IR	Met	Met
ES 5	IR	IR		IR	Met	Met
ES 6	IR	IR		IR	Met	Met
ES 7	IR	IR		IR	Met	Met
ES 8	Met	Met		IR	Met	Met
ES 9	IR	IR		IR	IR	Met
ES 10	IR	Met		Met	Met	Met
ES 11	IR	Met		Met	Met	Met
ES 12	IR	Met		Met	Met	Met
MS 1	IR	IR		Met	Met	Met
MS 2	IR	IR		IR	IR	Met
MS 3	Met	IR		Met	Met	Met
MS 4	IR	IR		IR	IR	Met
MS 5	IR	IR		IR	IR	Met
MS 6	IR	Met		Met	Met	Met
MS 7	IR	Met		Met	Met	Met
MS 8	IR	Met		Met	Met	Met
HS 1	IR	Met		Met	Met	Met
Total IR Campuses	18	11		10	4	0

Note: Table indicates the campuses with an *Improvement Required* (IR) and *Met Standard* (Met) rating for elementary schools (ES), middle schools (MS) and high schools (HS) for school years 2013–2017.

The district's transition to the new superintendent leadership role was joined by multiple campuses that were identified as low-performing requiring the immediate attention by the new superintendent. The district's chronological order of major events included:

- Campuses (18) receive state rating of *Improvement Required* (Fall 2013)

- School board appoints new superintendent (Fall 2014)
- Superintendent announces plans to restructure (Fall 2014)
- Superintendent introduces new organizational structure (Fall 2014)
- Campuses (11) receive state rating of *Improvement Required* (Fall 2014)
- Requirement for the reconstitution of campuses (Fall 2014)
- Superintendent appoints deputy superintendent—new position (Spring 2015)
- District instructional support system moved to campus level (Spring 2015)
- Principal Reassignments made to low-performing campuses (Fall 2015)
- Continuation of campus and principal support structures (Spring 2016)
- Campuses (4) receive state rating of *Improvement Required* (Fall 2016)
- Continuation of campus and principal support structures (Spring 2017)
- Campuses (all) receive state rating of *Met Standard* (Fall 2017)

The reconstitution of seven of the ten schools requiring evaluation of the principal to determine if they were to remain on the campus or be reassigned was a critical task in the turnaround work that required a strategic focus. The principal reassignments for the campuses under the new leadership of the superintendent are indicated in the table below:

Table 2

MISD Principal Assignments for School Year 2015–16

Schools	Year of IR	Reconstituted	Principal Reassignment	Internal or External Principal Selection
ES 1	Former IR	Yes	Yes	Internal
ES 3	Former IR	Yes	Yes	Internal
ES 5	3rd Year	Yes	Yes	Internal
ES 6	3rd Year	Yes	Yes	Internal
ES 7	3rd Year	Yes	No	NA
ES 8	3rd Year	No	No*	Internal
ES 9	3rd Year	Yes	Yes	Internal
MS 2	3rd Year	Yes	Yes	Internal
MS 4	3rd Year	Yes	Yes	Internal
MS 5	3rd Year	Yes	No	NA

Note. Table indicates the ten campuses with an *Improvement Required* (IR) rating and the Principal Assignment decisions effective for the School year 2015–16. Principal exited the district is indicated by *. Not Applicable is indicated by NA.

The organization of the school district leadership team of Mason ISD prior to the current superintendent's tenure was comprised of the superintendent, the chief academic officer, the chief administrative officer, the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, the assistant superintendent for school leadership services, and three executive directors for school leadership of the elementary, middle, and high schools. The team also included the directors of communications, network operations, information systems, instructional technology, athletics, as well as an internal auditor, legal services, police chief, and construction project manager.

In the newly appointed role of superintendent and the inheritance of 11 low-performing schools, of which over half of them requiring reconstitution, the

superintendent decided to look internally and assess the district level administration structures and their role in supporting the needs of the campuses. In his review and research of the roles on the school district leadership team, he decided to restructure the team based on the support structures needed for all campuses, regardless of their respective accountability ratings. The format that the superintendent employed to review and research the roles of district leadership will be described in more detail in the responses to the research questions of this study.

The restructuring of the school district leadership team now included a newly-established deputy superintendent position intended to clearly define who was second in command. The restructuring superintendent recalls of the organizational structure of the previous administration when he served as the chief administrative officer:

> We had one superintendent and an equivalent of like four assistant superintendents. They called two of us chiefs and the other two were assistant superintendents but they were all equals. What I ran into my first four years is, there was never really a number two person in charge.

In addition to the deputy superintendent, the chief administrative officer, chief academic officer, and the three executive directors for school leadership of elementary, middle, and high schools now comprised the new superintendent's district leadership team. The two former assistant superintendent positions that existed under the previous superintendent's administration were no longer part of the current organizational structure. These two positions included the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction and the assistant superintendent for school leadership services, who had oversight and a direct

reporting structure from the three executive directors for school leadership of elementary, middle, and high schools. The directors of communications, network operations, information systems, instructional technology, and athletics remained part of the structure as well as the internal auditor, legal services, police chief, and construction project manager.

Table 3

Comparison of Superintendent's District Leadership Team

	Previous Superintendent	Current Superintendent
Deputy Superintendent	-	✓*
Chief Admin Officer	✓*	✓*
Chief Academic Officer	✓*	✓*
Assistant Supt of Curriculum & Instruction	✓*	-
Assistant Supt of School Leadership Services	✓*	-
Executive Director of School Leadership ES	✓	✓*
Executive Director of School Leadership MS	✓	✓*
Executive Director of School Leadership HS	✓	✓*

Note. Table reflects key district leadership team members but is not an all-inclusive list of district level administration. Direct reporting structure to Superintendent is indicated by ✓*. District role not in existence at the time is indicated by -.

Description of Participants

The participants for this study included the superintendent and his recommendation of any additional interview participants who were district leaders and had a direct involvement in the decisions to hire or select the principals for low-performing campuses. The deputy superintendent was his only recommendation. Upon inquiring if anyone from the human resources department should be interviewed, the

superintendent determined that he would be able to address questions regarding the district's hiring practices since he had previously served as the chief administrative officer and had final hiring authority for campus principals.

The following is a profile of the two participants in this single case study. It will include their previous and current roles, years employed by the district, and their roles in the selection and/or assignment of principals to low-performing campuses. The profiles will also include their perceptions of the district as they assumed their new roles.

Easton. Easton was hired in Mason ISD after serving four years as a superintendent of schools for a Texas school district who had an enrollment of over 15,000 students. Having served four years as the chief administrative officer in Mason ISD, he was appointed the district's superintendent in the summer of 2014. He had the vantage point of working in the district prior to his appointment as he explains:

> In our case, we had a lot of people in this building and even though I've only been the Superintendent for four years, I was the chief administrative officer the prior four years so eight total years here, which was the best thing. In those four years, I was able to already kind of gauge what is going on here.

Easton has direct involvement in the decision-making process to hire or select principals for all campuses. The principal candidates, whether internal or external, followed the district's screening and hiring protocols which included a hiring committee consisting of district and campus level staff. Although the candidates followed the district employment protocols and recommended by a committee, the final hiring decisions were made by the superintendent.

Hailey. Hailey was hired for the newly established position of deputy superintendent for Mason ISD at the end of the fall semester of 2014. Prior to joining Mason ISD, she had previously served as an assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction in a Texas school district who had an enrollment of over 34,000 students. Hailey reports directly to the superintendent and works closely alongside the chief academic officer and directors for the three executive directors of school leadership for the elementary, middle, and high schools. In addition, she has oversight of the instructional coaches and specialists.

When Hailey was brought on board as the deputy superintendent, she began her role amid district leadership changes and a heightened sense of urgency. She recalls when she began in the spring semester of the state's requirement to reconstitute four schools:

> I thought it was the worst thing TEA could ever put on a school district because the dates were set by TEA, and all of these were scheduled right before the STAAR assessments. So when you have a reconstitution, every employee in the school, with the exception of cafeteria and grounds men, everyone else had to re-apply. You can imagine all these teachers and saying "oh by the way, we're supposed to be trying to get these schools out of IR [*Improvement Required*]."

The superintendent had already informed the top district leadership of his plan to restructure his organizational chart and to create new positions. In addition, the district was in the process of having to reconstitute multiple schools. Having no previous experience of her own in this area in her former job roles, she remembers:

> For me emotionally, that [reconstitution process] was the most difficult thing that I would say that I dealt with as far as not understanding. It was so counterproductive for everybody and we couldn't do anything about it. That's what we had that year.

While Hailey does not have direct involvement in the hiring of campus principals, she and the superintendent are the only two district leaders directly involved in the assignment of campus principals. She describes her partnership with the superintendent on principal assignment decisions:

> We worked on it very closely together using data. Of course, he and I already had a firsthand … a wealth of information from our Friday meetings and then some of our visits. We already knew … we were very much in agreement on who the principals were.

The superintendent and deputy superintendent would discuss these principal assignments with the respective executive director for school leadership of elementary, middle, and high schools. They would jointly share the new assignments during individual meetings held between them and the principal who reported to the respective director.

School District Screening Methods

The department of human resources in Mason ISD is under the direction of the chief administrative officer. The team includes two senior directors: one director oversees the certified and professional personnel; the other director oversees those who are categorized as auxiliary, support, substitute, or temporary personnel. Their teams consist of human resource analysts, managers, application specialists, administrative

assistants, and a certification officer. The school district's criteria for decisions regarding the hiring, dismissal, reassignment, promotion, and demotion of district personnel is included in the district's school board policy. According to the school district board policy, the criteria that may be considered, in whole or in part, in the hiring decisions of personnel includes: transcripts supporting academic or technical preparation; proper certifications for grade level, subject, or assignment; experience, recommendations and references; appraisals; and other performance evaluations. The district's needs are also considered.

The online application is the first step in the screening process, including the online submission of required documents using the link provided by the department of human resources located on the district's website. Depending upon the job posting, an application specialist will ensure the basic requirements of the position are met, all required documentation is submitted, and criminal background checks are verified. The director of human resources reviews the applicants and then forwards them to the appropriate hiring manager. The candidates who are best qualified are selected by the hiring manager, who normally conducts interviews before recommending a final candidate.

When the job announcement is for the position of a school principal, there are additional steps involved. The principal candidate will participate in two rounds of interviews. The first round included a committee to select two principal candidates. The second round is conducted by the superintendent, from which he will make the final hiring decision. The format of the second round of interviews directly involving the

superintendent will be described further in this chapter.

School Turnaround Levers

In categorizing the emerging themes of this study, four main levers of change for school turnaround developed by the University of Virginia School Turnaround Program were used as a theoretical framework to organize the findings due to the strong parallels between the themes and four levers of change. The parallels between the four levers of change and the school district's methods for the turnaround of their low-performing campuses were effortlessly connected throughout the study.

The University of Virginia School Turnaround Program was established by the educators in business and school turnaround from the Darden School of Business and the Curry School of Education. It is the only program in the country working with district and campus leadership to improve their school system's conditions by focusing its approach on four main levers of change for achieving dramatic improvement in persistently low performing schools (University of Virginia, Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education [University of Virginia PLE], n.d.).

The four main levers of change identified to improve conditions resulting in school turnaround which are utilized as the foundation of the university's program are leadership, differentiated support and accountability, talent management, and instructional infrastructure. These four levers of change were applied to structure the findings of this single case study into the emerging themes of district leadership alignment, campus fit, and a differentiated school support system. The first theme of district leadership alignment between the school board of directors, superintendent,

central office leadership, and principal leadership matched emulated the leadership lever. The second theme that emerged was that of the campus fit between the principal and the campus needs, which connected to the talent management lever. The last theme highlighted was that of a differentiated school support system, which combined the remaining two levers of change—the differentiated support and accountability lever and the instructional infrastructure lever.

Results from Question One

What selection methods does a school district utilize to hire a campus principal for low-performing campuses? Initially, it is crucial to note that before identifying the principal selection methods employed by the district, a significant theme emerged in the district leadership alignment of the school board, superintendent, central office administration and campus leader. This alignment helped set the stage for the school turnaround efforts that were led by the principals selected by the district.

District leadership alignment. The leadership lever is one of the four main levers of change that is identified by the School Turnaround Program at the University of Virginia. It is defined by the following characteristics: the willingness of the leadership to make the turnaround initiative a priority, allocates the capacity to do what is necessary to drive the work, and has the bandwidth to support the turnaround efforts (Robinson & Rhim, n.d.). According to the University of Virginia School Turnaround Program, the district should reflect that the "systems would require the will and capacity to prioritize what is necessary to improve the lives of the children they serve and present a clear vision for the path ahead" (University of Virginia Darden/Curry Partnerships for Leaders

in Education, n.d., para. 4)

The prioritization of what was necessary at the district level to drive the school turnaround work at the campus level was evident in the alignment between multiple leadership levels in the district.

School board leadership. As defined by the Texas Education Agency, the school board, in general terms, as a legal entity who has the "power and duty to govern and oversee the management of the district" (Texas Education Agency website, 2007–2015, para. 2). The superintendent and the deputy superintendent both shared a common thread in their reflection of the past three years in how the role of school board support impacted the success of the school turnaround efforts at the campus level. The school board recognized that something needed to happen to move 18 of their campuses from an *Improvement Required* to a *Met Standard* rating. Of being interviewed for the superintendent position while in his former role of chief administrative officer, Easton recalls:

> It was going to take a lot of change. If they weren't about change and couldn't support that, they did not have to pick me as superintendent. And I loved my other job, I could have stayed doing that. It's good though that even in the interview they said, "That's exactly what we want. We want someone to come in and make those changes, knowing it's going to be hard to do but not just keep doing the same thing. We recognize that something is not right and every year we are not getting better."

The superintendent was keenly aware that changes not only needed to be made but he

understood that it would require leadership alignment between him and the school board in order to implement them. In his astuteness, he ensured in his interview to emphasize that his entry plan would require these changes to improve student performance. In retrospection, the superintendent believes that his reference to the district's need for change is what landed him the job and garnered the board's support as he stated, "So I think that actually helped me get the job, I was just telling them we are going to make a lot of changes and we did. So that helps when you have the support of the board."

The deputy superintendent echoed the superintendent's sentiment on the board's support of necessitated changes. Hailey was able to provide an alternative lens by sharing a perspective of someone who had not been previously employed in the district in describing the board's support:

> We have an excellent board, we really do. An excellent board in the sense that they don't get in our way. They have a very clear line, 'we don't cross over into instruction.' In other words, they don't cross over into telling us how to do things. There was no micromanagement of the superintendent because the district cannot run like that so they made sure that with any new board member, they were reminded of those duties.

The deputy superintendent proceeded to clarify how the school board had determined to delineate a clear line in the respective roles of the board and superintendent as she further stated:

> They [school board] had gone through the Lone Star Governance training and they were all now very clear. The focus of the school board meetings would

> always be to focus on student outcomes. The training helped how they operated as a board. Shortly after the training, two new board members came on board but they were clear on the fact, like others, that he [superintendent] runs the district.

The commitment of the school board in maintaining how they operated as a school board, including the onboarding of new board members, speaks to the importance of the sustainability of the turnaround efforts. Although it was clear that the school board supported the work for school turnaround and they had a clear understanding of their role, there was no doubt that the school board also held the district leadership team accountable for student outcomes. The focus of the school board meetings was evident as she described the school board meetings:

> What they do that I appreciate, because that keeps everybody at a high level of awareness, is that we do have to report, at every board meeting, on student progress. There are three things that every report is required to have ... where we were, where we are and where we were going. The where we were, it's mainly looking at the data. The where we are … we had to be explicit in showing, by school, what we're doing well and … where we're not doing well. Then for the where we're going, we have to be answering the questions, like 'what are we doing about it'… the board is very supportive, but they hold us accountable, very accountable.

The leadership of the school board and the importance of their role in laying out the foundation for the turnaround work expected of the superintendent was easily identified in the interviews conducted. In addition, the deputy superintendent highlighted how the

superintendent leveraged his leadership and board support in making the necessary changes to support the work at the campus level.

Superintendent leadership. The superintendent of a school district is defined as the chief executive officer who implements the vision of the school board. In this implementation of the vision, the leadership responsibilities of the superintendent incorporate ten distinct but overlapping functions as developed by Olivárez (2013): 1) governance operations, 2) curriculum and instruction, 3) elementary and secondary campus operations, 4) instructional support services, 5) human resources, 6) administrative, finance, and business operations, 7) facilities planning and plant services, 8) accountability, information management, and technology services, 9) external and internal communications, and 10) operational support systems—safety and security, food services, and transportation (p. 7). The superintendent's responsibility of selecting and assigning a principal to a campus involved multiple functions—primarily human resources, elementary and secondary campus operations, and governance operations. In addition, the support structures for campus leadership involved curriculum and instruction and instructional support services.

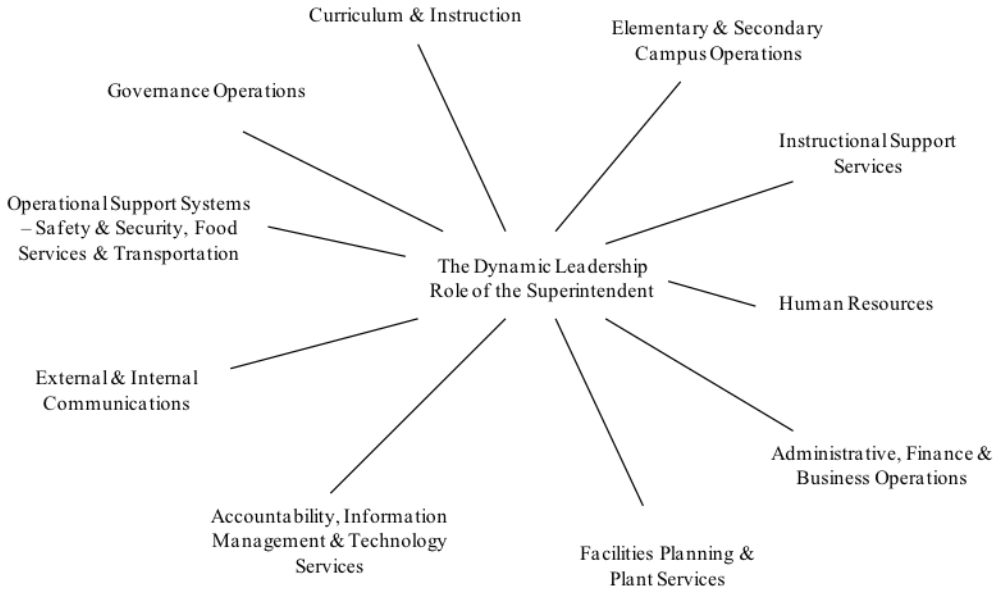

Figure 3. *Framework of District Functions and Leadership Competencies of School Superintendents. Reprinted from* The Cooperative Superintendency Program Field Experience Guidebook *(p. 7), by R. Olivárez, 2013, Austin, Texas: The University of Texas at Austin. Copyright 2013 by The University of Texas at Austin. Reprinted with permission.*

The superintendent's abilities to navigate through these multiple functions is vital to their role and their effectiveness in driving school turnaround work. The school board of Mason ISD clearly delineated their role and the superintendent's role in improving student outcomes; the next layer of leadership to be aligned was that of the superintendent's cabinet level team.

Driven by the goal of the school board focus on student outcomes and their clear support of the direction in which the superintendent was leading the district, the superintendent began establishing how his new leadership position would reflect a seamless alignment alongside the board and commitment to improving student outcomes. The deputy superintendent recalls of the superintendent's transparency in ensuring that his central office administration team was aware that changes were forthcoming:

> So, in the fall before I came here, he had already informed all of the top leadership here that he was restructuring and he said, "I am restructuring. I'm creating new positions. You're welcome to apply. You may or may not get the position."

This began to very swiftly change the central office climate under his new leadership. With the vantage point he had in serving as the former chief administrative officer for four years, it afforded him the opportunity to study the organizational structure and its functionality, thereby assisting him in expediting the needed changes as he explains:

> It really helped to be in the district four years before becoming superintendent because if I had come, I mean, I kind of was still an outsider. If I had come from the outside in that one year, I would have taken, a full year or more, just to learn what is going on in this district but I had four years to kind of witness it.

The benefit of district insight allowed the changes by the superintendent to be swift, which reflected a leadership urgency and reinforced the need for the changes. In retrospection by the deputy superintendent, she observed the role of the superintendent in driving the systemic work of campus turnaround and concluded:

> The superintendent cannot do it alone. They must surround themselves with good strong leaders to meet the needs of the district. There is a certain degree of politics, the superintendent has to have a balance between student interests up front and careful to bring on board people who can help him. The superintendent has to delegate but has to keep in touch. Superintendent goes to principal meetings, even if it's for 15–20 minutes, doesn't stay for the whole meeting. I

> give him input/feedback and he addresses it at the principal's meeting. Message is given by him.

The superintendent's commitment to the focus on student outcomes was clearly reflected when it required the involvement of the local chapter of the American Federation of Teachers. The superintendent recalls of the involvement:

> The other thing we deal with a lot in our district is associations, the unions. It would be so much easier to do what we need to do but a lot of times, you know their job is only to fight for the teacher, good or bad. And a lot of times when we have had some bad teachers that we've had to document and move out, they have tried to step in the way to prevent that and that goes back to your question about choosing principals. I have to choose principals that are going to do what is right for the schools even if it is not popular with those associations.

The deputy superintendent highlighted how committed the superintendent was to the focus on student outcomes when she had association interactions. She recalled of the time when focusing on setting up systems and balancing the relationship of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) by stating, "The AFT gave me a lot of pushback. Respectfully, I told the superintendent that the AFT would be a distraction to what I was brought here to do. He then chose to work with AFT directly". The superintendent continued to display the willingness to make school turnaround a priority by removing any obstacles or distractions from his staff to drive the work forward. The superintendent continued his approach in the alignment of his administration office to be reflective of the bandwidth necessary to support school turnaround efforts.

Central office leadership. The central office leadership of a school district consists of staff members leading departments. They vary in their roles but all ultimately serve as a support system for the campuses in their district. The organizational structures of school districts fluctuate across the state. When asked about what changes were required at the central office level to make the hires and selections to turnaround low-performing campuses, Easton explains:

> Well one, we were very top heavy at the district level. What I found is for maybe four straight years, the district had a one star in the FAST report. Now the FAST is the financial allocation study of Texas. You'd be surprised, some people don't even know what the FAST report is, they get it confused with FIRST [Financial Integrity Rating System of Texas]. In our case, we had a lot of people in this building and even though I've only been Superintendent four years, I was chief administrative officer the prior four years … In those four years, I was able to already kind of gauge what is going on here. We were very top heavy, we never had more than one star, I had been here four years and I couldn't tell you what people did in this building. So, when I became Superintendent, I interviewed every single person, directors, to just have them introduce themselves to me and tell me what they did. And what I found is that we had several people unclear of what their role was and then others with a lot of repetitive duties.

The combination of the district's one-star rating from FAST, the status of low-performing campuses and the validation received in his one-on-one district leader meetings, the superintendent knew that he had to restructure district level support to the campuses. In

the restructuring process to solidify his team, there was a major change in the organizational structure from two assistant superintendents to one newly-established position. The deputy superintendent recalls this decision as she states, "With the previous superintendent and this superintendent, the executive leaders didn't fit into this system." The superintendent explains his decision for this move:

> And so then, up here, I made all administration reapply for their job so I restructured. I didn't have a Deputy Superintendent and I created one. What I ran into the first four years is, there was never really a number two person in charge. A lot of times, the Superintendent would say you all need to get that worked out but things wouldn't get worked out. Once we could max out it was just a tie, nobody was going to break the tie. I said, well you know, I am definitely going to make a lot of changes but when I'm out of the district, I want a clear number two person in charge and that's why I created the [role of the] Deputy Superintendent. Her name is Hailey Garcia and then after her we have two chiefs, one is over all of the operations/financial side and then one is over the academic side, C&I [curriculum and instruction] and all of that so that restructuring helped. Every person that was here in that first description that there were four assistants under the Superintendent, none of them are here. So, everybody is pretty much new in the key positions here in central office.

While taking these steps to restructure his leadership team, he was acutely aware of the high number of campuses needing to demonstrate improvement in student outcomes and the support they were going to require in order to do so. He recollects:

> In the meantime, you have all these struggling campuses. We found out we had about 60–63 extra people in this building that we put them all out on the campuses. There were instructional coaches, there were instructional specialists, they had titles that clearly there wasn't a lot of instructional coaching going on with that many IR [*Improvement Required*] schools. So, we decided that every school would get a curriculum assistant for Title I schools and the schools that were not Title I got instructional teacher advisors. The role was similar but we had to change it up a little bit because of funding them through Title I. Their role was really to get in the classrooms more, have more ownership to a specific school instead of being a district level coach that never really got out of this administration building. And that made the biggest difference because now they were accountable to how their one school did, Principals could use them for coaching teachers, professional development, classroom observations, walk-throughs … made a big difference.

Among the many changes occurring under his new leadership role, the superintendent gained additional insight about the climate of the central office administration team. When asked about the feedback he received from stakeholders regarding the changes, he shares:

> A lot of frustration but very appreciative of the changes, in those one-on-one meetings, a lot of people had been frustrated, they had not been treated well. They let a lot of that out in the meetings. They didn't feel they were really able to do their jobs, a lot of micromanaging and that's not my style. So, once we were

> able to get the new structure in place and clearly define what their roles and jobs were, it was hire good people and let them do their job. And I think that was what they valued the most.

In the restructuring of the district level support systems, the central focal point of improving student outcomes mirrored the focus of the school board, superintendent and his central office administration team. The superintendent directed his attention to the selection of principals to ensure this critical campus role would reflect the direct alignment of the focus by district leadership.

Principal leadership. The principal leader is the person assigned the leadership position of a school and is responsible for guiding, directing, or influencing campus stakeholders. The superintendent was strengthening the district support structure to be responsive to the needs of the low-performing campuses. The district's role in responding to campus needs would be driven by the campus principal. The superintendent understood the importance of selecting a principal who would be able to prioritize the needs and the work needed for the improvement of student performance.

When a principal candidate meets the criteria of the district's screening methods described earlier in this chapter, the superintendent was asked what role he played in the selection process of the campus principal. He describes the process:

> On all the principals, I make the final decision. We do put a committee together and that will consist of campus teachers and district staff. We also are structured here where we have a Director of Elementary Education, Director of Middle Schools, and Director of High Schools. That appropriate level administrator sits in

> on the interviews. We narrow it down, we bring two back for a second round of interviews and those interviews are with me and then I make the decision.

As he explained, the first round of interviews is conducted by the committee and the second round of interviews is conducted by the superintendent. When asked about his decision-making process in selecting a principal for a low-performing campus, he first clarifies the different formats that are used in the interviews:

> When we bring those two finalists in, I sit down with them. While, the first round of interviews is kind of based on experiences, scenarios, things like that. The second-round digs deeper. My interviews really focus on the use of data and how they hold teachers accountable. I'll put them in scenarios as well and ask them how they would address it.

In providing the clarification on the formats of the interviews, the superintendent expressed the importance of why his focus is on the principal's data use and teacher accountability plans:

> A lot of that was mainly because I wanted to see that we were putting people in place that could handle making tough decisions. It wasn't going to be easy, I knew that from the beginning and I couldn't have a passive principal. I needed them to be assertive, they needed to have experience, and they need to really come in knowing they had to do what was right, not so much what was popular.

The deputy superintendent stated that she did not play a role in the process of hiring or selecting principals due to the organizational structure. She explains:

> Let's say it is a high school position. Then the school leadership for the high

> school will be the one that will sit it on the [first round] interview, but as deputy superintendent, I don't sit in. Specifically, because of what we have, the school leadership directors, they are the direct supervisors for their principals.

Although she was not involved in the hiring or selection of principals, she and the superintendent were closely aligned in their perceptions of the skills of the principals three years ago. She describes their leadership strengths:

> I always look at Marzano's correlates of effective leadership, at those 21 core levels. So, in my mind, when I am looking at principals to see their strength as instructional leaders, I'm always looking at what traits do they have. I was seeing that we did not have instructional leaders; we primarily had managers. I say managers because they truly have a manager model, where they assign or they delegate primary duties to their staff … and they're the ones that carry it out form the get go, so the principals are not involved in really knowing.

The superintendent validated the deputy superintendent's perception of the school leadership when describing the condition of the lowest performing schools three years ago. He explained that the schools were nice, some brand new, but attributed the low-performance to the cause that "it was more of an issue of leadership and the accountability of teachers." Therefore, the superintendent knew what he needed to concentrate on during the second round of interviews. Once he assessed the principal's capacity in the utilization of data to quickly identify and prioritize the needs, the superintendent had to assess the principal's commitment to driving the work by making changes or decisions regardless of their popularity.

The superintendent's method in selecting the campus principal for the work required at a low-performing campus was now in alignment to the same commitment to student outcomes as held by the school board, superintendent and district support systems. The alignment of the key stakeholders reflected the willingness of all the district's leadership levels to prioritize the work of school turnaround.

The final decision being made by the superintendent to select principal candidates based in large part to their background and experience in data usage and teacher accountability prompted the next step in assigning them to low-performing campuses. The second research question explores how the principals were assigned to the low-performing campuses.

Results from Question Two

What methods does the school district use to assign campus principals to turnaround low-performing schools? This research question gleaned insight into district's methods in assigning the selected principal to the school. The superintendent and deputy superintendent were the two key staff members directly involved in the principal assignment process. Based on the campus needs, joined by the principal's experience and background, the district could establish a campus fit, which was the second theme of the findings.

Campus fit. The talent management lever is the second main lever of change and is defined as establishing conditions to increase the number and impact of highly effective teachers and school leadership team members in high-need or prioritized schools. The district team works alongside principals to identify, support, and hold

struggling teachers accountable.

The University of Virginia School Turnaround Program further describes the talent management lever win the district as having conditions that would consist of:

> Creating the environment for success, which required having the right people in place to carry out the work as well as enhancing the selection of school leaders, the number of highly effective staff, and the continued growth of existing staff (University of Virginia Darden/Curry Partnerships for Leaders in Education, n.d., para. 6).

In creating this type of environment, the superintendent and deputy superintendent began the process of determining who the right people were by reviewing campus needs and principal backgrounds as well as district support systems for teacher accountability to learning.

Principal leadership. When the Texas Education Agency had given notice that schools needed improvement, the superintendent says of the changes that were already underway:

> I know they were going through some different professional development. It just all came so fast, the school knew, the district knew that they had a good number of schools underperforming. I don't know that a lot was being done per se to help fix the problem faster. But then when I became superintendent, yes, we made a lot of changes, real fast.

The deputy superintendent reiterated the superintendent's description when asked of the changes that were in place stating, "Nothing, because, remember when we came here, we

had to reconstitute schools, which was all new to me."

In the observations made of the minimal changes in place, both leaders agreed that it began by reviewing the campus leadership. The superintendent left no room for doubt of his starting point at the campus level when deciding how quickly to act to replace the principals. He explains:

> That was just based purely on student outcomes, I knew right off the bat if our student academics were not at the level that it needed to be, it was going to have to start with the principal. And so I knew right away that we were going to have to make changes at some of those schools and like I said, I believe two of them were already there and had only been one year, I really thought they were good candidates, they just needed more support and coaching.

The deputy superintendent held the same belief as the superintendent on where to begin the changes because of the impact the principal had on student results. She recalls of the minimal progress in student performance in her first semester of her role:

> I mean the semester could not have come soon enough to a close for me because we weren't able to make the progress that I thought. My goal was that we are going to get 11 schools out in one semester. And I really felt that we could do it, but what I saw as to the reason why it didn't happen was because of the leadership. I mean you can't teach instructional leadership in that little, short period of time. In other words, they are supposed to be doing it already.

In reviewing campus leadership, the superintendent had to break sacred practices held by the district. He exhibited the willingness to commit to the turnaround work that was

needed for the low-performing campuses. He explains in wanting to see a change in the leadership of the schools:

> What I had noticed before is that there was a routine practice in the district that we are going to rotate principals every three to four years. Really didn't understand why they did that, but they did, and a lot of it sometimes was for no reason. And so to me, it takes a principal awhile to build a culture in a school and put some systems in place and if you don't give them time to do that, you've pretty much defeated everything that they have worked on for the past couple of years so we stopped that and we have just built in more support for those principals, helped them become better leaders, improved our overall district wide professional development and training.

The superintendent understood the importance of time in establishing change but, more importantly, identified that it wasn't just about hastily exchanging campus leadership and not having a justification for the change. He perceptively was digging deeper into the levers of talent management. The deputy superintendent mirrored his thinking when she recognized the critical need to have instructional leaders on the low-performing campuses. She further explained what necessitated the need for change in leadership:

> So there could be instructional leaders. They needed to know how to review student performance to drive decisions for instruction and, during budget time, to have a rhyme and reason why they were budgeting what they were budgeting and for professional development for teachers, for professional learning. I mean that drives everything.

Not having the luxury of time on their side due to reconstitution requirements, the deputy superintendent provided further insight on the need for the leadership changes by adding:

> We needed to make those changes. Because you had schools already with four years and three years IR [*Improvement Required*], you don't have time. Time is of the essence. You don't have time to be developing a manager into an instructional leader. You don't have time to do that because you're taking care of the students. We didn't have that opportunity to do that, and so we had to look from within and see what would be a better match, who would be that person that would fit the needs of one of those 11 campuses.
>
> It was challenging for us because, even though we knew, "Okay, we have this principal, who had a strength and who we really think will work for this campus A," but because of the way that we were working with the teachers in this district, which was a big challenge for us, was the teacher associations.

The limited time constraints were a challenge but the superintendent and deputy superintendent also encountered teacher associations attempting to prevent the movement of teachers from the campuses. The two district leaders responsible for assigning principals knew the type of principal aptitude needed to turnaround the low-performing campuses. The deputy superintendent further highlighted that the district "needed strong leaders who were going to address issues at hand that impact student outcomes."

They were shaping and creating the profile of a desirable principal for low-performing campuses working in their district. The deputy superintendent was seeking an instructional leader, while the superintendent was identifying additional

characteristics, stating:

> I am really looking at the individuals and their experiences, I am really looking to see how they are going to fit in to that community, I am looking at their work ethic and how accountable they can hold people under them.

The superintendent further adds, "I have to choose principals who are going to do what is right for the schools even if it is not popular with those [teacher] associations." In the midst of establishing a profile of the type of principal needed to drive the turnaround work, the superintendent and deputy superintendent assessed the individualized needs of the campus.

Campus needs. The needs of the schools varied by campus but the process to inventory those needs was clearly evident in the interviews, and data played a major role in the needs assessment of the low-performing campuses. The collection of multiple data sources, both formal and informal, were employed as the superintendent states, "We are very big on benchmarking. We assess our kids and we are very big on using our data. So we studied the data and we took it down to the teacher level." The use of student assessment data drilled down to the teacher level provided a unique lens for each campus and the needs that each one had to formulate the support needed. The deputy superintendent described the process of reviewing the needs assessment data in more detail by stating:

> It is a combination. Well, first of all, our central office people, now they're very visible at the campuses, so it's firsthand from our specialists, our coordinators, our directors being in the classroom because now the principals are always asking for

the staff like, "I need for the math specialist to come and meet with my teachers," because now they meet with the teachers during their planning or they do classroom observations. Now, by being out there, you know firsthand. Say when you go to the classroom, now you're going to see what is the natural setting. When you're meeting with them, that's when you really find out what they know or how well they know, their depth of knowledge and the TEKS. That's one piece.

We have the weekly assessments and we have the common assessments by six weeks. I told you earlier how I have a set structure. It's very structured. We meet with the principals, and we go over the data, and we review what the resources are. We bring in the curriculum assistants, do the same thing with them. We do item analysis. There's just several things that we do, so that's another piece.

Then we use the AR [Accelerated Reader], the Renaissance Learning. We have a very good system in place now. It's very, very solid. We put systems in place. We track weekly, the librarians.

The inventory of the campus needs and a profile of a principal to move the turnaround work forward allowed the superintendent and deputy superintendent to move to the next step in assigning the principal to the campus to establish a campus fit.

Matching of principal with the campus. As reflected in the lever of talent management, the superintendent and the deputy superintendent were establishing the conditions to increase the effectiveness of the campus leadership and campus leaders' work assignments that were ideal for improving student outcomes. The insight into the needs of each campus based on the analysis of student assessment data spurred the next

step in determining which of the principals would be best suited to meet the campus needs based on their respective leadership strengths and experiences. The deputy superintendent clearly recalls of the matching process:

> We already knew their [principal] strengths. I always focus on strengths. I mean I've just always done that, just something that I learned when I was an elementary principal and attended a conference. It was a principal session on how to deal with teachers that were low-performing in terms of student success. I used to focus, prior to that training, on trying to correct what the teacher was doing wrong, and so my take away from that conference very early on was it's the opposite: you focus on their strengths.
>
> That's what I told you earlier, that one of the things that we looked at was "What were the strengths?" We looked at the principal's personality, we certainly looked at their strength and their knowledge in terms of an instructional leader and how proactive they were in assessing student learning and then just over all what kind of a climate they had in their current position. I mean even though it's a large district, since we had visited campuses so much, we knew the culture.

The firsthand knowledge from campus visits linked to the benefit of two different district leader's perspectives of the principal allowed for strategic matching of the principal to the campus. The deputy superintendent recollects of the principal calibration process between her and the superintendent to discuss the fit between the principal and the campus:

> That was very helpful. Now, had we not been in the campuses as much as we

were, I don't know if I would be able to tell you the same thing. That helped. I was obviously newer here. I mean I had just had that one semester. Dr. Smith who had been here, three or four years before he got this job, he knew of the principals, so that helped.

That helped to solidify what we were ... I mean I had come in as an outsider. I'm new, so my perspective is fresh. His is "I know these principals. I know this of them," so we were able to match, an outsider coming in fresh and then one who's been here, and we were agreeing, so it was very easy. I remember that afternoon that we sat down.

The district leader's process in strategically determining the best fit between the principal and the needs of the campus begged the question of the amount of autonomy the principal would have at the campus level. The deputy superintendent explained as to the autonomy the principal had regarding what to focus on once assigned to a low-performing campus:

No, they knew what they [focus areas] were, because we knew. For example, let's say in a campus, which was the case, we knew that there was a grade level that no matter what, these teachers have been there for a while, it was like they were going to do what they felt was the right thing. We [superintendent and deputy superintendent] let the principal know, "You will have to deal with this situation that you have at your campus." Like I said earlier, the school leadership directors are the immediate supervisors, so the school leadership directors were aware of the [focus areas].

The school leadership directors concurred as well, but it was now the

> school leadership directors working closely with these new principals like they do with any other new principal, but because these were changes that were made because of low-performance and lack of instructional leadership skills or strengths, it was like they knew, "At this campus, these are the areas where the principal needs to be focused on, and we put the principal that has, in our opinion, the best skillset."

The superintendent provided further insight to the question of autonomous leadership. Although the district had a process to select a principal that determined the campus matching based on digging deeper into the talent management lever, he defined the parameters the principals would have to follow:

> My approach was that I didn't want to take or I didn't want to make any assumptions that they [principals] knew what to do. And so in a lot of our professional development and training, it was taking the approach with all of them, not just even at the struggling schools, but all schools that these were the things we were going to be about in Mason ISD and we're going to state that we are all on the same page from the very beginning. So it really was about the systems that we were putting in place, regardless of what school they were at, it was going to be best practices, what they needed to do in monitoring their data and what they were going to do in holding teachers accountable.

The time and effort put forth by the district leadership to strategically find the match between the campus and the principal did not prevent the superintendent from losing focus on another layer of accountability to student learning—teachers on the

campuses. The district leadership's commitment to the turnaround work was further evidenced by the district's support to the principals in holding teachers accountable.

The superintendent explains how teacher support was provided, "So, we studied the data and we would take it down to the teacher, from there we provide instructional coaches, both either at the district level and campus levels to work with those teachers." In providing this type of differentiated teacher support based on data, the superintendent also wanted to send a clear message of a new culture of accountability that would not allow for a state of mediocrity by the principals and/or teachers. He explains:

> The other thing I would say to that to was that that there had been a culture that it was okay for teachers and maybe even administrators to do okay jobs and maybe sometimes not even do their job and if they ever pushed for termination, they didn't feel like they were supported. So, they pretty much stopped recommending people to be terminated. So my approach was completely different, I would encourage them if there are teachers who are not doing what you are asking them to do as principals or even assistant principals and you are holding them accountable, we put them through documentation training.

This set the tone for the district as the superintendent's message was clearly delivered to those closest to the school turnaround efforts and aided in the culture shift to understanding the new expectations. He further stated of the impact of his message "They are not going to stick around here if they are not going to do their job and that got around real fast." This provided an impetus for change as he described the culture changing from "I have a job to do and if I don't then I am not probably going to be here

very long."

The culture was also beginning to shift as the varied levels of district leadership were being held accountable to the school turnaround work due to their proximity to it. In describing the former culture, the deputy superintendent details:

> The teachers built a culture in this district where the way they perceived the principals was "You can't tell me anything. You can't do anything about me and my employment." That was very much in place, so reconstitution helped us a little bit because teachers that had been in that school for X-many years and were really very ineffective, now they were displaced because the principal didn't want them, the new principal. And so they were displaced and some of these teachers said, "I would rather retire." We were able to weed out some of them, but we still have a number that are still continuing contract.

The deputy superintendent also noted that the mindset of the principal also had to be changed due to the past experiences of the inability to remove teachers who were not contributing to an increase in student performance. She recalls of the principal mindset:

> Then changing the mindset of the principals as far as the principals were afraid to not renew a teacher because of AFT, and they felt that "I'm not touching that teacher (in other words, I'm not going there with that teacher)." When the principals started to really relate to me because I would just say, "You need to work with this teacher. You have to put forth effort and show preponderance of evidence that you're trying to get the teacher to improve and then submit your non-renewal if the teacher is not willing to grow as he or she needs to." That's

when I found out that they didn't feel comfortable doing it.

The deputy superintendent was discovering how deeply rooted this culture was in the school district. As she sought to understand the hesitation in holding teachers accountable, she discovered where it may have originated. She recollects of principal conversations where they shared past experiences:

> Middle school principals met with me and informed me that they had put forth a non-renewal but the teacher was renewed anyway and that teacher went and informed other teachers about it so started a culture of being untouchable. Then they would ask the department of human resources to assign them to another campus, moving from one campus to another was not helping them. That's when I learned about how much of a set culture it was, so that wasn't easy to break, but in talking to the board about it, they assured us to assure the principals that they would support them with proper documentation. Board had brought to their attention that because of low-performing school and knew how involved AFT was, board knew that the principals needed to know that the board will support them and if they had the evidence, that they would be supportive of them. I also wanted the director of human resources to see the bigger picture of the students so we worked together.

The principal awareness of the school board's support in making changes to the teaching staff who were not being effective provided permission for the principals to move forward. The deputy superintendent shares the experience of the first principal recalling to her of his experience in documenting a teacher to be removed from his campus:

> So, it was one principal at a time, one principal at a time. It started with middle school because they were very close knit. I remember the first principal, so, so afraid, but the board supported the non-renewal, and that kind of gave a turn. So, when I look at the success of this district, I would definitely have to say that the board plays a very important role, but that's a whole topic in itself.

The district leadership was clearly fostering the understanding that everyone had a role in the work of school turnaround. This assisted in solidifying how the campus would be supported as they now would have a principal assigned to them based on campus needs and a level of defined accountability to the improvement of student outcomes.

A significant theme emerged that was not within the scope of the research but played a critical role in the success of the turnaround efforts at the campus level. The theme was not directly linked to the levers of talent management and leadership alignment, but rather to the levers of instructional infrastructure and differentiated school support system. The theme identified was the differentiated school support system that was established by the district to support the turnaround efforts of the principal.

Differentiated school support system. The superintendent and deputy superintendent both emphasized, throughout their interview responses, the district's systems of support that were developed to assist the principals at the low-performing campuses. These support systems were easily classified into the levers of instructional infrastructure, differentiated support, and accountability due to the parallels drawn between the two.

Instructional infrastructure. The University of Virginia School Turnaround

Program defines the instructional infrastructure lever as having an effective instructional infrastructure that includes a valid and unified assessment strategy, data management system responsive to needs, and a high-quality curriculum including instructional strategies tailored to meet the needs of students (Robinson & Rhim, n.d.).

This infrastructure is leveraged to prioritize data-driven professional development needs with a sense of urgency. Further explained as the core component of a district support system "involves data-driven instruction to create an evidence-based approach to better serve students. System leaders create and implement a cohesive assessment strategy, responsive data systems, and a high-quality curriculum" (University of Virginia Darden/Curry Partnerships for Leaders in Education, n.d., para. 7).

The superintendent and deputy superintendent identified the lack of systems when they took on their new respective roles and responsibilities in the district. The high mobility rate in the district prompted the superintendent quickly identified an area that required attention, as he describes:

> The other thing that was really big was when I came in, I found out real fast, and I had my first four years, was that there was no common curriculum. A lot of the campuses were really just trying really to figure out what to do and were given the okay to do it on their own. We have a high mobility rate in this district and that was even more reason in my first year, we put in one curriculum, PK–12 and it was district wide. Everybody followed it, they didn't have a choice and the scope and sequence was the same so when the students moved, because of the high mobility, they would pick up at the new school where they left off at their old

school and that wasn't happening. So that was a big difference.

The deputy superintendent recalls of the autonomous state that the principals were in during the previous administration. The district level oversight was minimal as was evident by the deputy superintendent's recollection of her first semester on board:

> Well, when I came here … and we're still experiencing a little bit of that now, it takes a while to have systems in place, but one of the things that this district ... certainly in everything that we looked at, trying to find out "Well, what's in place?" There really were no systems in place. The way that the previous administration operated was it was left up to the campus leadership.

In addition, the deputy superintendent recalls the amount of autonomy also provided in the areas of budgets, spending, and curriculum and instruction. She remembers:

> One of the things in saying that … I started out by saying that the allocation of federal funds, local funds, even if it was a grant, all that money went directly to that campus principal so that principal was the one who would carry out the expenditures and did not require any approval from anyone from central office. With that being said, what you find when you look at a district this size with still 36 elementary campuses, 12 middle schools … and now we have six high schools, every campus was pretty much on their own. And so, I saw that as being schools that were in isolation. So, decisions that were made about programs, about anything, testing, even though district wide, the district did have common assessments, but even then, sometimes principals would, if they felt like [saying],

> "We're not going to be doing common assessment every six weeks," they just didn't. So, central office would have common assessment data of only those that had actually done it.

The deputy superintendent was beginning to see how this lack of systems was leading to inconsistencies in the district. When the she was preparing for her interview, she was puzzled at the lack of data patterns in the district to determine the needs of the district. She states of her review of district data:

> When I looked at the data, I really didn't see a trend. It was like in this campus, it was third grade math that was the lowest or in these two or three campuses, but over here, it was fifth grade. It was kind of very zigzagged in content area.

After being hired and beginning her work, she recollects the response provided to her by staff members regarding the reasons for not observing any district-wide trends:

> Like I remember coming here, my first time that I was asking for the common assessment, I'm told, "Well, you're not going to have it for all the campuses. The reason being is that these principals decided not to test." So, systems were not in place, and that has been one of the areas where we've worked very hard, the superintendent and I, in putting systems in place.

The deputy superintendent now understanding the reason she was unable to identify district wide data patterns, set out to change some expectations. She states, "I got stricter with data, where I gave out a schedule in advance to the principals and told them that this was when you were going to do the common assessments." The schedule included timelines/deadlines for uploading data and the running of campus data reports. When we

had common assessments, those were major pieces of conversation because that's what drove campus decisions.

As tight expectations were being established by the district, the superintendent continued emphasizing the use of the district-wide curriculum as a non-negotiable. During the Superintendent's Leadership Conference, the deputy superintendent recalls:

> Two of the four days dealt specifically with the district curriculum, orientating the principals, what the scope and sequence was, the three weakest objectives by content area, elementary, secondary, just everything that I felt that they needed to know that was important. We did that during the SLC [Superintendent's Leadership Conference].

The implementation phase of the non-negotiable use of the district-wide core curriculum and common assessments caused the superintendent and deputy superintendent to recognize the need for supporting the instructional infrastructure they were creating as well as accountability to its implementation.

Differentiated support and accountability. The lever of differentiated support and accountability is defined as having the foundation to provide necessary and differentiated support to the turnaround schools while holding all staff accountable for high expectations as well as the principal who is providing support focused implementation, and responding quickly to eliminate barriers (Robinson & Rhim, n.d.).

The school turnaround program from the University of Virginia further states, "System leaders must provide schools with the capacity-building, support, accountability and flexibility needed to achieve urgent change" (University of Virginia Darden/Curry

Partnerships for Leaders in Education, n.d., para. 5).

This support must be tailored to each individual system and school. One of the major changes that the superintendent implemented, in collaboration with the deputy superintendent, was to move the district instructional teams from the district office to campuses.

The tailoring of the support was designed by the deputy superintendent due to her entry plan in meeting the staff members whom provided support to the campuses. Of her first two weeks in her new role, she describes:

> I spent my first two weeks or so meeting each one of them, but all I wanted to know was "What were their strengths?" Like I told you earlier, I just wanted to know "What is your certification?" I formed four groups. Monday through Thursday and we brainstormed. We looked at "What were the look-fors?" We went to the campuses. We let the principals know why they were going to be out there because I already knew there were no systems that they'd had here with this district, so I told them ... I wanted them to trust them, to trust me that we were there to help their teachers because teachers are like, "Why are they here?" and "Why me?" So, we had to put everybody at ease and say, "We're here to help you."

The deputy superintendent then began her process for the assignment of approximately 60 of the instructional support team members based on what she had learned from them in her one-on-one meetings. She describes the process:

> I was very familiar with the campus leader and the school leadership, so I already

had that in mind, and so I looked at the certification that these 57 people had in terms of their core area. I started off with reading, and so I looked at all the people that we had here that were English Language Arts background, as their certification or their degree, their undergraduate degree and then prioritized.

Like I said, I already knew the campuses, so I ranked them. I just pretty much matched the strongest English Language Arts specialist that we had. I went ahead and I made a list for Easton because he gave final approval and so went ahead and assigned them the way that I was recommending. And so, when I met with him, I showed him why I was doing this, why it was being done in this manner. That's really the way that we proceeded to do it.

The deputy superintendent set up a meeting structure to analyze data in determining the support structures needed for the campuses. She describes the meeting format:

Monday through Thursday they [instructional team members] would be out at the campuses. Every Friday in the morning, this team of 57 would meet in their four groups. I felt like I needed to be the one to select because by then I kind of knew who was strong, and so I picked the strongest person from the core group to be the leader. I had a leader for each core group. On Friday mornings, they would meet in the board room by groups, and they would discuss about what they saw.

That evolved to "What were the things that were in place that were on track? What was not, very little to no evidence of what was not in there, whether it was the curriculum, the resources, delivery of instruction?" All these components that we identified were not in place, and then the third component

was what we were going to be doing to provide support the following week. They did that for the first two hours. It was from 9:00 to 11:00.

While having this type of structure in place, the fidelity to the process was the accountability aspect of the structure because the superintendent and deputy superintendent would attend the meetings; this reflected the district leadership's emphasis on alignment to student outcomes. The deputy superintendent explains this of her reason for creating this process to be inclusive of the top district leadership:

> Easton and I walked in the last hour, which was from 11:00 to 12:00. The way I set it up was that I had every leader present to us, and actually they were really reporting out to everybody as well. I had them put everything on a PowerPoint so that I would always have an electronic copy, and so that's how everybody knew how we were doing as a district. I wanted, more than anything else, the Superintendent to know because I was very involved…. but still I was learning a lot from them, so that's how the two of us ...
>
> I mean there was no guessing. I mean he was right there. As far as the principals, like I said earlier, when we did let them know ... I mean we let them know what was going to be happening at the regular standing meetings that we have, that this team of people were going to be out there. I remember very specifically sharing with them that there was protocol. I set a protocol and nobody could deviate from it because I felt like the principals needed to trust us.

The protocol the deputy superintendent described for the instructional team members that were on campus involved a campus entry process of check in protocols, a process for

when the principal was unavailable, and a campus exit process. She also included a process for how the team members were to manage teacher conversations to continue building trust of campus principals as she describes:

> What I also put as standard for the 57 people that were going out was that if a teacher was complaining about the principal or anything that did not pertain to why they were there, the protocol I set was that you would have to tell them, you would need to stop that teacher from talking to you about that and say, "With all due respect, what you're sharing with me is something that you need to address with your principal," because what I taught the team was if you stay quiet, the teacher is going to perceive it that you're listening to them, so I was being very careful that, from the get go.

The emphasis on reviewing data at the highest levels linked by principals receiving campus support from one of about 60 instructional team members assigned to their respective campuses, the system had an alignment of differentiated support and accountability. The superintendent reports, "Based on the assessments on where kids are, we will plug in additional resources at those schools until they get back on track. We play close attention to that at our principal meetings every month." This responsiveness from this district reflected the commitment to student outcomes by providing support and accountability structures.

Summary

Chapter four provided findings using a qualitative research methodology structured by a single case study design. Four main levers of change for school

turnaround were utilized in organizing the themes that emerged from the study. The chapter provided a description of the school district, each school participant, school district screening methods for principal candidates, school turnaround levers, and the results from the interview questions. The study produced three themes that were built to support the selection and assignment of principals to low-performing campuses resulting in rapid turnaround of schools. The three pillars were district leadership alignment, campus fit, and differentiated school support systems. The next chapter will offer a discussion resulting from the research findings, and provide implications and recommendations for future research.

Chapter Five: Summary of Findings, Implications and Recommendations

The emphasis on student achievement results to measure school effectiveness has shed a spotlight on the role of the school principals and their impact on student learning. The past three education reform efforts focusing on student assessment results as a method for school accountability has precipitated a need for school district leaders to be strategic in selecting an effective principal who will lead their schools and increase student achievement rates. However, it is not clear how the principals are selected and placed on campuses within the district. Therefore, this study focused on one district's effective hiring and selection practices that resulted in the rapid turnaround of schools.

This chapter includes a summary of the study's findings garnered through the two research questions, implications of this study, limitations of the study, and suggestions for further research.

Problem Statement

The principal role has been directly linked to the success or failure of a school as was highlighted by the current educational reform initiative of Race to the Top that called for principal replacement in three of the four turnaround models. The focus on the link of the principal role to success or failure is critical to having the right people in place as Cavazos (2012) states, "Principals have always played an important role in education; however, the recent focus on improving academic achievement for all students has increased the urgency to select the best possible individuals for these positions" (p. 8). Furthermore, Murphy (2008) asserts that "The central factor [in a sharpbend] is 'leadership' for without it the potential of the people in the company is unlikely to be

released, sustained, and directed effectively" (p. 80). If research indicates that leadership is central to effectiveness, school districts will have a need to become strategic in the hiring and placement of leaders to meet the demands of school improvement. As Cavazos (2012) maintains, "The increased demands and roles of school leaders make the selection process of principals a critical initial step in placing principals in schools" (p. 8). The area this study aimed to address is the selection method that the school district utilizes for the hiring of a campus principal. Does the school district use a specific method for selection? How are campus needs factored into the hiring process? What role do stakeholders such as the superintendent and director of human resources play in the hiring process? Does the selection method matter when school improvement is needed?

Purpose of the Study

The school accountability ratings based on student achievement results has increased the need for selecting a high-quality principal to lead those efforts is critical to a school district. As Cavazos (2012) explains, "Principals are expected to account for raising the academic achievement of their pupils and the performance of their schools" (p. 3). Given that expectation, how does a school district select the best qualified candidate and then assign them to a campus to increase student achievement? Duke (2004) states, "The principal who is ideal for opening a new school or improving an already high-performing school may not necessarily possess the qualities needed to turn around a persistently low-performing school" (p. 14).

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explore the effective selection and assignment practices of principals that resulted in rapid turnaround of

schools requiring improvement in levels of academic performance.

Research Questions

The overarching research question that guided this study focused on the screening methods the school district utilized in matching the leadership characteristics of a principal to the needs of low-performing campuses. This study addressed the following research questions from the perspectives of district leaders:

1. What selection methods does a school district utilize to hire a campus principal for low-performing schools?
2. What methods does a school district utilize when assigning a principal to a low-performing campus?

Methodology Overview

A qualitative methodology through a single case study design was utilized for this study to allow for the exploration of the selection process by observing the how versus the why (Hays & Singh, 2012). Interviews included the use of a semi-structured format conducted with two key district leaders who had been in the district for at least three years. The interview questions were used to explore the how of the principal selection method utilized by a school district. Sipe and Constable (1996) state, "discourse assumes the form of dialogue between various knowers, as they attempt to describe and understand the world from the point of view of someone else" (p. 158).

This case study design aligned to qualitative data collecting processes. The data sources collected during this study were interviews conducted with the participants of the study. The data collection included archival documents that informed the process that the

district utilized in the hiring and placement practices of the campus leaders as well as field notes written during the study. The researcher was able to utilize the perspective of an insider in conducting the interviews and in analyzing the data due to a background as a central office administrator and school turnaround consultant,

The participant roles essential to the study were the superintendent and the human resource representative(s), as well as recommendations by the superintendent of district leaders who had direct involvement in the decisions to hire or select the principals. The human resource representative(s) was to be selected by whomever was serving as the primary staff member(s) responsible for the hiring and placement practices in the school district. The study included the superintendent's interviews from the hiring window of principals during the district's recruiting season.

The superintendent's recommendation only included the deputy superintendent. The superintendent was asked for a recommendation of whom to interview from the human resources department. As a result of his direct involvement in the hiring or selecting of campus principals, he determined that there would not be a need to interview a human resource representative. The superintendent stated that he would able to address any questions to gain insight of the district's hiring practices due to his former role as the chief administrative officer, a position that included oversight of human resources department. Additionally, in his current role as superintendent, he possesses final decision making authority on the hiring of a campus principal.

Therefore, the two participant roles who had direct involvement in the hiring or selection of the principals for the low-performing campuses were included in this study.

The two participants of the study included the superintendent and the deputy superintendent.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was a consistent process that began with the initial collection of data. This conforms to Baxter and Jack's (2008) statement that the, "Triangulation of data sources, data types or researchers is a primary strategy that can be used and would support the principle in case study research that the phenomena be viewed and explored from multiple perspectives" (p. 556).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed using an audio transcription and dictation application. The researcher took anecdotal notes during the interviews. The transcripts and notes were printed for coding purposes. The transcripts were provided to the interviewees to ensure that they accurately reflected their responses. The informed consent waiver form was emailed to the two study participants and the researcher was provided oral consent to their participation in the study. The interviews were held in the respective offices of the superintendent and deputy superintendent.

The two types of processes that were used in the interview transcripts were open coding and axial coding to compare similarities and differences. Hays and Singh (2002) define open coding as "a type of wide review of the data answering the question 'What large domains am I seeing in the data?'" (p. 345). The open coding process was followed by axial coding, which is "a process that begins to refine the open coding and examine relationships among the large open codes to understand more in-depth what the data are revealing" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 345). The two coding procedures facilitated the

development of a code book which assisted in organizing the data into the four main levers of change for turnaround; these were further refined into three emerging themes.

Delimitations

This study was designed to examine only one Texas school district which included student demographics of African American, White, Asian, American Indian, Pacific Islander, and Two or More Races reflected the state average between -.2 to +27. The Hispanic enrollment in the district is between 75 to 80% compared to 52.2% of state enrollment reflected a +22.8 to 27.8% difference. The percent of Economically Disadvantaged students in the district of 65 to 70% closely matched the state average by +7 to 11%. Additionally, the At-Risk population of the district reflected the state average by + 5 to 6%. The overall student enrollment per grade level is closely aligned to the state average -1 to .3% from Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade. Therefore, the study is conducted in a specific time frame, location, and included a predetermined select group of participants. This study was comprised of the superintendent and district leaders who have had a direct involvement in the decisions to hire or select principals. Students will not be included in this study.

Limitations

Limitations of this study were those typically found in qualitative methodologies. The findings of the research only apply to the school district being studied and may not be generalizable to other school districts. Additional limitations include research bias in collecting and researching data, a small number of selected participants, and a narrow focus on a single case study. However, a single case study design which includes a small

number of selected participants allows for depth in the research process.

Assumptions

This study was based on two assumptions:

1. The interview participants would provide honest responses based on their experiences and understanding.
2. The inclusion criteria of the interview participants are appropriate and therefore, assures that they have experienced the same or comparable phenomenon of the study.

Discussion of the Findings

The study documented the process the school district used in the selection of a campus principal. The results of this study will provide superintendents and human resource managers information that can be used for process alignment in the selection of principals by the human resource department of a school district. Because research shows that an effective school requires an effective leader, the selection of a well-matched campus principal is imperative to school improvement efforts. Where a handful of districts in Texas have reported that they have accomplished a turnaround in a short time frame, this single case study was geared to research a successful district and understand which practices in principal selection contributed to those results.

The findings were based on the perspectives of two key level executive leaders of one district, the superintendent and the deputy superintendent. The superintendent provided a unique perspective as having also served for four years as the district's former chief administrative officer which included oversight of the human resources department.

The deputy superintendent likewise provided another perspective as someone externally hired by the school district.

The superintendent and deputy superintendent expressed that the alignment between all levels of district leadership in the commitment to student outcomes was critical to the success of the 11 campuses moving from receiving *Improvement Required* ratings to *Met Standard* ratings in three years. They also perceived that the strategic calibration of selecting and assigning principals to campuses based on campus needs proved critical to the process. The research findings also established that the differentiated district support structures were crucial in supporting the principals placed on low-performing campuses. These three findings supported the selection and assignment of principals to these campuses.

Results of Research Question One

The findings of this phenomenological study were described in the previous chapter and were categorized relative to two research questions. The three themes emerging from the study were organized utilizing the four main levers of change in school turnaround as identified by the University of Virginia School Turnaround Program and were further developed into the major overarching themes of leadership alignment, campus fit, and differentiated school support systems. These themes are presented to answer the following questions from the perspective of the school district leaders:

1. What selection methods does a school district utilize to hire a campus principal for low-performing schools?
2. What methods does a school district utilize when assigning a principal to a

low-performing campus?

The first question of the study addressed the selection methods the district leaders utilized in the hiring of a campus principal for a campus not performing academically. As the school district's former chief administrative officer who had oversight of the department of human resources, the superintendent explained the hiring protocols that were followed in the district's hiring of campus principals prior to the superintendent's final selection of the principal candidate. The deputy superintendent noted that she did not have a direct or indirect involvement in the selection process as the final decision was made by the superintendent. Although the deputy superintendent did not have direct involvement in the hiring process, she provided insight to the support provided to the district level leadership necessary to make necessary campus and district level changes.

Selection method. After the hiring committee narrowed their decision down to the final two principal candidates, the candidates moved forward to the second interview phase where the final decision was made by the superintendent.

The superintendent explained that the screening methods and first round of interviews were no different than the basic components of the hiring process, including internal and external recruitment, initial eligibility screening, district competency screening and school fit interview panel (The New Teacher Project, 2006). The focus of his second and final interview round was to dig deeper beyond the résumé and first round of interviews conducted by the committee. In the iceberg model, the district's screening process and first round of interviews focused on qualifications such as degrees, knowledge, skills, teacher practices, etc. These are above the surface level of the iceberg

and typically discovered through screening methods and committee interviews (Steiner & Hassel, 2011).

During the second round of interviews conducted by the superintendent, he reported that the purpose of this interview was to dig deeper. During the second interview, the superintendent focused on the principal candidate's use of data and plans to hold teachers accountable, two areas of turnaround leader competencies (Hitt, 2015). These two principal competencies would materialize through the candidate's responses to the superintendent's scenario-based questions. The scenario-based questions allowed the superintendent to identify the thoughts and potential actions of the principal, which are located beneath the surface level of the iceberg model (Steiner & Hassel, 2011). The superintendent explained that he concentrated on these two areas to ensure that he was acquiring leaders who had experience and the ability to handle making tough decisions that weren't necessarily popular but were right campus efforts geared toward increasing student achievement. The superintendent understood the focus of accountability on the leader as the one responsible for the success or failure of the campus (Kafka, 2009). The superintendent's awareness that the turnaround work would not be easy given his expectation of accountability to student outcomes, he wanted to dig into the candidate's background for evidence the candidate would be able to meet the turnaround leadership needs of the low-performing campuses in the areas of data and accountability. The superintendent decided to go beyond measuring the candidate's qualifications to identifying specific leadership competencies vital to their achievement due to his understanding that specific actions and competencies define successful turnaround

leaders (Kowal & Hassel, 2005).

While identifying the selection methods utilized by the superintendent or the assignment practices applied by the superintendent and deputy superintendent, a significant theme emerged in the leadership alignment of the school board, superintendent, central office administration, and campus leader. This alignment helped set the stage to support the school turnaround efforts that were led by the principals once selected and assigned to a campus. The district's preparedness to prioritize the needs of low-performing schools and provide essential resources is vital to school turnaround (Player, Hitt, & Robinson, n.d.). This preparedness by the district was exhibited when the leadership alignment at all levels reflected the focus on student outcomes.

Leadership alignment. The findings of research question one identified the selection method used by the superintendent for identifying campus leaders for the low-performing campus. In addition, the findings materialized a theme in the alignment of district and campus leaders supporting the selected campus leaders. The leadership alignment involved that of the school board leadership, superintendent leadership, central office leadership, and campus level leadership.

School board leadership. The findings suggest the critical role the school board had in the success of the turnaround efforts of the superintendent. The school board's commitment to change aligned alongside the superintendent's entry plan to make the needed structural and personnel changes to the organization. Furthermore, the findings suggested the state's newly established school board governance training provided the opening for the school board to change the way they operated by identifying and

prioritizing student outcomes as a focal point of their work and their board meetings. This renewed focus on student outcomes assisted in setting the tone and future direction of the district and its expectations to student outcomes important in hiring decisions (Clifford, 2012) as this helped ensure the principal candidate role was aligned to the district's vision. The new clarity and delineation of their role gained through the *Lone Star Governance* training allowed for the school board's commitment to student outcomes shape the support and autonomy provided to the superintendent to make the necessary changes.

Superintendent leadership. With the school board's strategic concentration on student outcomes, the findings demonstrated the superintendent's willingness and commitment to prioritize school turnaround and ensure its alignment to the focus of increasing student outcomes. Successful turnaround leaders take action to break organizational norms when failed roles and routines impede success (Public Impact, 2008). These actions, linked to the success of school turnaround, were reflected in the study when the superintendent terminated the district's practice of rotating the principal leadership every three years and changing the central office support structures.

Central office leadership. The study demonstrated that the alignment of focus to student outcomes by the school board and superintendent validated the need for the superintendent to have an organizational structure reflecting the same commitment. As a result, the structural changes which included the establishment of the deputy superintendent role, the removal of two assistant superintendent positions, three principal supervisory positions directly reporting to superintendent and the movement of

approximately 60 district level instructional positions to campus level positions granted the opportunity for the leadership of central office to expand its bandwidth of support to the improvement efforts of student outcomes. These bold actions taken by the superintendent were validated by Public Impact's (2008) report noting, "school turnaround is possible, but it takes a broader, concerted effort with daring leadership at the helm and persistent, achievement oriented collaboration among staff" (p. 3).

Principal leadership. The research indicating that the principal impact on student learning was second only to teachers (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004 validated the superintendent's emphasis on strategically selecting a principal leader who would be supported by the district structures committed to student outcomes. Identifying a skill set in the use of data and teacher accountability, the superintendent selected principal leaders who would use data to prioritize the campus needs and hold accountable those who did not align to improving student outcomes.

The finding for the first research question revealed the selection process used by the superintendent and highlighted the imperativeness of a superintendent to bookend the commitment to school turnaround at all levels of leadership. Beginning at the school board level and ending at principal leader level, this alignment of leadership solidified the commitment to student outcomes that were expected once the selected principal leader was assigned to the low-performing campus.

Results of Research Question Two

The findings in the second research question were collected from both the superintendent and deputy superintendent's responses in explaining the methods used in

assigning the campus principals to the low-performing campuses, as both had a direct involvement in the process. The theme of campus fit captured the principal leadership role, the needs of the campus, and the matching process used by the district. In addition, the third finding around differentiated district support systems was also gleaned from this question in how the principals were supported after their assignment to a low-performing campus.

Campus fit. The selection of principal leaders based on committee recommendations and evidence of the leader competencies sought out by the superintendent revealed the next step of the process utilized by the district to assign the principals to the low-performing campuses. Three factors were considered in determining a campus fit—the principal leader, campus needs, and the fit between the leader and campus needs.

Principal leadership. The study revealed that although the superintendent and deputy superintendent agreed that school improvement efforts began by reviewing the quality of the campus leadership (Norton, 2002), it required a deeper look. The campus reconstitution requirements that precipitated the need for principal assignments to low-performing campuses allowed little time in assigning principals. The participants looked inwardly for principals in the district by utilizing the same selection requirements plus the addition of the instructional leadership lens that the deputy superintendent was applying. While the participants canvased the principals in the district, they simultaneously assessed the individual needs of the campuses.

Campus needs. The use of informal and formal data by the participants in

making decisions was evident in the interviews. The weekly assessments and common assessments each six weeks provided a profile of each campus. In addition, the transition from district-level instructional support to campus-level instructional support offered firsthand knowledge as to the depth of implementation of instructional expectations and campus culture. Utilizing these data points as well as the selected principals identified, the participants assigned the principals to the low-performing campuses based on a match between the two.

Matching of principal with the campus. The study found that the participants spent the time to focus on the matching process. They reviewed the principal's personality, strengths, instructional leadership, analysis of student learning, and the current climate of their own campus. The time and focus allotted to the matching process permitted the participants to appropriately match and assign a principal to the campus based on their needs was critical in turning around a low-performing school (Clifford, 2012). The superintendent provided one perspective on principals because of working in the district for four years and the deputy superintendent provided an external perspective anchored in the knowledge that was received from the instructional support teams on the campuses. The commitment to, and focus on, student data and principal leader selection allowed for in-depth understanding of the campus and afforded the participants an opportunity to provide an entry plan of the things that needed to be addressed quickly. The process utilized by the superintendent and deputy superintendent to determine a campus fit was an important finding in the study linked to turning around a low-performing campus.

The last finding was critical and surfaced from the superintendent's astuteness in stating "My approach was that I didn't want to take or I didn't want to make any assumptions that they [principals] knew what to do." The deputy superintendent recalls of the meetings which were held by the superintendent and the principal being assigned to the low-performing campus, "We scheduled individual appointments. Dr. Smith and I sat in these meetings. We outlined major areas of focus: core academic focus, school climate, district curriculum implementation with fidelity." The superintendent and deputy superintendent had clearly provided defined autonomy to the newly assigned principals for campus turnaround.

An additional finding that was not within the scope of the study in the selection and assignment of campus principals but rather an indirect link that was referred to many times in the study and surfaced as a significant finding. This frequently mentioned theme concerned the superintendent's decision to restructure to align the focus to student outcomes once the principals were assigned to their respective campuses and was an indication of what else was going on in the district. The superintendent categorized the systems and structures into the areas of instructional systems and the differentiated support offered by the district that resulted in accountability to improving student outcomes.

Differentiated district support systems. The participants throughout the study referenced the support systems provided to the principals of low-performing campuses. These areas ran parallel to the final two levers of change from the school turnaround program, instructional infrastructure and differentiated support and accountability.

Instructional infrastructure. The study discovered the lack of systems existed as the participants stepped into their new leadership roles, including the lack of a common curriculum and consistent assessment strategy. Given the high mobility student rate and the need to identify and support district-wide and campus-level needs based on data, the participants implemented a common curriculum which included a cohesive assessment strategy; both structures were non-negotiable across the district. The creation of this instructional infrastructure to support the turnaround work was critical in identifying and differentiating levels of support to the low-performing campuses ("UVA School Turnaround Approach," n.d.). With the district's establishment of a non-negotiable common curriculum and assessment strategy, the simultaneous fidelity to its implementation was ensured by the support and accountability systems developed by the participants.

Differentiated support and accountability. In the restructuring of the district's leadership roles, the three principal supervisors known as the executive directors for school leadership of elementary, middle, and high school now reported directly to the superintendent. They were held accountable to the student outcomes on the campuses under their oversight as they were part of the weekly data meetings, which both participants also attended. The superintendents' attendance at the weekly meetings relayed the message of both commitment and accountability to student outcomes. The weekly data meetings determined the deployment of support at the district- and campus-levels. The participants relayed that the accountability to increase student performance was a focal point at the school board meetings. Every school board meeting included an

update on the student progress of all campuses. In addition, the board continually asked what support was needed when progress wasn't reflected. This support extended to the principal's decisions to remove teachers not showing adequate progress, provided the required documentation was submitted.

The utilization of the four main levers of change developed by the University of Virginia School Turnaround Program ("UVA School Turnaround Approach," n.d.) were used as a theoretical framework to organize and categorize the emerging themes of this study due to the strong parallels between them. The themes were further refined to reflect the connectivity between the three areas of leadership alignment, campus fit, and differentiated district support systems as shown in the figure below:

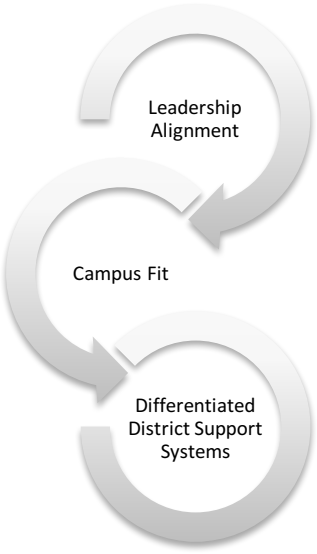

Figure 4. *District Connectivity for School Turnaround.*

Implications for Practice

The continued emphasis on school achievement results to measure school

effectiveness has not changed the critical role of the principal to lead these efforts. This study provides district leaders an understanding of which practices in principal selection contributed to the improvement of academic performance resulting in a district moving from receiving 11 *Improvement Required* ratings to zero in three years.

The effective practices of the selection and assignment of principals were rooted in the leadership alignment focused on student outcomes at all levels of school leadership, the campus fit between the principal's skillset and needs of the campus, and the differentiated district support systems.

The leadership alignment of the school board, superintendent, central office, and campus should be centered on student outcomes. The superintendent should leverage their leadership role to attain commitment to student outcomes from all key levels of leadership in a school district. The focus on student outcomes provides a foundation on which the principal selection decisions center on the ability of the principal to move the work forward.

The campus fit between the principal and the campus is critical to the improvement of student outcomes. As a result of no two schools being exactly alike, the district should conduct a needs assessment of not only the campus but a profile of the principal skillset needed to drive the turnaround work. This would help enhance and expedite the assignment practices in a district.

The district should develop a plan of district support systems that can be differentiated based on campus needs, as well as the needs of the principal. The plan should include the process for determining needs, the deployment of support, and the

monitoring of impact. The plan should be inclusive of the onboarding of any principal to ensure fidelity to district expectations. The plan would need to include ways in which the key leaders within the leadership alignment structure are accountable to the plan.

The focus on these three areas would strengthen the district's selection and assignment of principals to low-performing campuses when time can be of the essence. In addition, the key district stakeholders would identify and understand their role in improving student achievement.

Recommendations for Future Research

Since this was a single case study focused on one large school district, the study could be replicated to include multiple districts reflecting the same level of success to determine commonality in the three areas identified in this study. The research should also consider the tenure of the superintendent and whether they were an internal or external hire.

An investigation could be conducted of the school boards receiving the *Lone Star Governance* training provided by the Texas Education Agency to determine if the school board made a change in how they operated to focus on student outcomes. The research should consider the impact it had on student learning and if the district realigned its organizational structure to enhance it support systems. An investigation could also be conducted about the attitudes and perceptions of school board members who do not allow regression to occur.

A study could be conducted on the district support structures for principals once they are selected and assigned to low-performing campuses to determine the appropriate

level of support. The research should delineate the support needed for someone externally hired and someone reassigned from another campus in the district.

Summary

This study was conducted to explore the effective selection and assignment practices of principals that resulted in rapid turnaround of schools needing improvement in levels of academic performance. The study found that the practices that led to those efforts were the district connectivity in the three areas of leadership alignment, campus fit, and differentiated school support systems.

The superintendent understood that the focus on student outcomes would result in significant changes at all levels of leadership in the organizational system. The superintendent began acquiring the commitment to change from the school board prior to accepting the superintendent role. In the leadership transition, the newly appointed superintendent and school board solidified this commitment to student outcomes through a governance training provided by the state. This support was critical in the autonomy provided to the superintendent to take action.

The superintendent had ensured the alignment of leadership at central office reflected this focus by creating a structure that was responsive to the needs of the campus. The restructuring of his district leadership team shifted to the creation of a deputy superintendent position and a direct reporting system to him from the executive directors responsible for oversight of campus principals. In hiring or selecting principals to be assigned to low-performing campuses, the superintendent ensured the principal's skillset was aligned to a student outcome focus and matched to the needs of the school to find the

campus fit between the two. This practice assisted in ensuring principals were not only a fit based on the campus needs but also a fit to the district's focus to student outcomes

The last finding in this study was critical to the campus turnaround efforts as it demonstrated the district's strategic establishment of district structures to support the focus on student outcomes. The implementation of a new common curriculum and assessment strategy supported the principals in their campus turnaround efforts. These two components of instruction assisted in creating an accountability to school improvement efforts. The superintendent's attendance at the weekly district meetings to review instructional data reflected his focus on, and prioritization of, student outcomes as well as accountability to the process. This accountability extended to the reporting of student progress for all campuses at the monthly school board meetings.

The superintendent of a district acquiring a significant number of low-performing campuses or a newly appointed superintendent entering a district and inheriting low-performing campuses may utilize the three areas outlined in this study to aid in developing a plan to help prioritize and focus their turnaround efforts in improving student achievement. The calibration of the district systems in the areas of leadership alignment, campus fit, and differentiated district support systems to align with a focus on student outcomes would set the stage for the strategic selection and assignment of principals to drive the turnaround work while increasing the district's bandwidth to support them once they are assigned. The identification of areas in a district system to either establish or strengthen may be the adjustment to the cog in the district system wheel that is needed to engage the motion of all turnaround efforts to set the campuses in

an upward trajectory in student achievement.

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